

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

STORIES • INTERVIEWS • BOOK & FILM REVIEWS

**STORIES JON WALLACE • CHEN QIUFAN TRANSLATED BY KEN LIU
PRIYA SHARMA • JASON SANFORD • CAROLINE M. YOACHIM**

INTERVIEWED ADAM ROBERTS PLUS ANSIBLE LINK • MUTANT POPCORN • LASER FODDER • BOOK ZONE



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Cover Price

Unfortunately the time has come to raise the cover price. We've tried very hard to avoid it, but with the rapidly rising costs of everything else in the end we had no choice. It might seem like a sharp rise at first glance but we do believe that it actually brings *Interzone* a little more in line with what's charged for other similar publications. Even so, we regret that we have to do it.

However, subscriptions remain the same and are hopefully still as attractive, if not more so, representing as they do a saving of £6 for six issues and £15 for twelve issues, with even greater savings available on joint subscriptions with our sister magazine *Black Static*. Lifetime subscriptions are also available, for £210. You can find more information and options on our website at ttapress.com.

The New Format

The response has been enthusiastic, and the consensus seems to be that the magazine is now easier to read and handle. We've had some very useful feedback so hopefully we've already made a few improvements, such as slightly larger text on the spine and slightly wider inside margins, and we'll continue to refine such things as we go along. A few readers miss not being able to lay the magazine flat. We can't fix that exactly, but the binding is sturdy so don't be afraid to apply some pressure (if you break it we'll replace it!). As always, your thoughts and feelings on everything are very welcome.

Ben Baldwin

With this issue Ben completes his year as *Interzone* cover artist. We hope you've enjoyed his unique takes on the Tarot deck. An interview with Ben, conducted by Ray Cluley, is now on the *Interzone* section of the website. As a brief taster, here's Ben talking about the inspiration for his 2012 covers:

"I'm not sure at what point I decided to use Tarot cards as inspiration although once I had the idea it seemed like something I could have a lot of fun with. Especially as I didn't plan what cards to do but left it up to chance by taking a random card from the pack for each cover. I've got a fairly low tolerance for New Age nonsense but I'm pretty interested in symbolism, mythology, the 'occult' and how various ideas or states of perception can be encoded in pictures. So I'm kind of fascinated with Tarot cards and their history and the temptation to go and play with these archetypal images and to let my own thoughts feed in to them is pretty strong."

We're delighted to announce that the 2013 cover artist will be the great Jim Burns.

Readers' Poll

It's time to start thinking about your favourite stories and artworks of the year, issues 238 to 243 inclusive. We'll announce the details next issue and as usual you'll be able to vote by post, email, forum or website.

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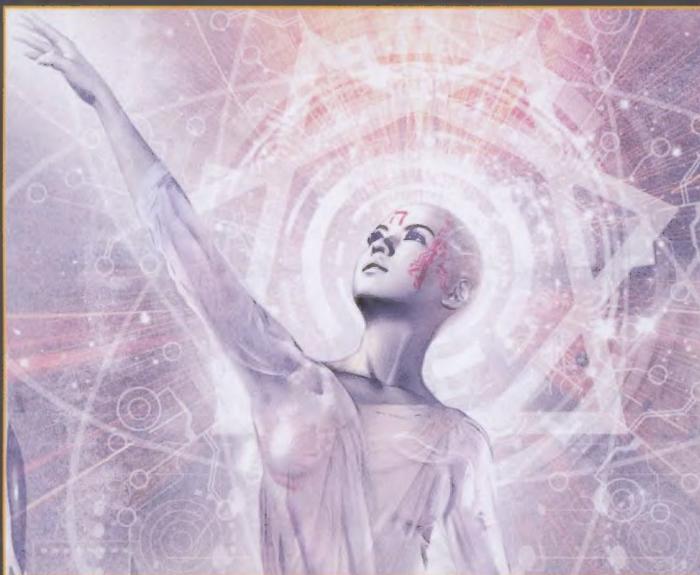
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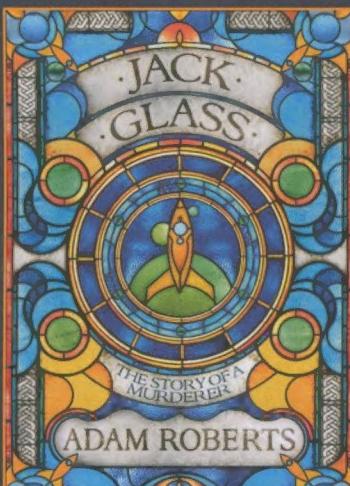
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Submissions

Unsolicited submissions of short stories are always welcome, but please follow the contributors' guidelines on the website.

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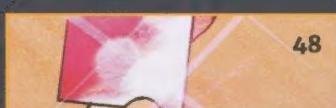
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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

As Others See Us. *Red Dwarf X* coverage exudes a nostalgic sense of *déjà revu*: ‘The show has an obsessive fan base, which stereotype would suggest is mainly men in their thirties and forties with a penchant for sci-fi and gaming – see how I’m subtly avoiding the provocative words “nerd”, “geek” or “unsuccessful with women” here?’ (*Telegraph*)

British Fantasy Awards.

Horror Novel: Adam Nevill, *The Ritual*. Fantasy Novel: Jo Walton, *Among Others*. Novella: Lavie Tidhar, *Gorel and the Pot Belied God*. Short: Angela Slatter, ‘The Coffin-Maker’s Daughter’ (*A Book of Horrors*). Anthology: *The Weird* ed. Ann & Jeff VanderMeer. Collection: Robert Shearman, *Everyone’s Just So So Special*. Screenplay: Woody Allen, *Midnight in Paris*. Magazine: *Black Static*. Graphic Novel: Joe Hill & Gabriel Rodriguez, *Locke and Key*. Small Press: Chōmū Press. Artist: Daniele Serra. Nonfiction: Grant Morrison, *Supergods*. Newcomer: Kameron Hurley. Special: PS Publishing.

The Weakest Link. ‘Which character in A.A. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh books is named after his son?’ Contestant: ‘Pooh.’ (ITV1, *The Chase*) • ‘John Wyndham’s 1951 novel, Day of the what?’ Contestant: ‘Day of the Locusts?’ ‘This 1966 film starring Raquel Welch had two men extruded from the body. What happened to the submarine?’ Contestant: ‘What is The Incredible Shrinking Woman?’ (both US *Jeopardy*)

Mo Yan, internationally noted Chinese author whose stories of rural China often include fantasy and fairy tale elements, won the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature.

As Others See Us II. ‘SF is also geeky because it’s like a geek – it can’t do relationships, its sex is all fantasy and it can build a warp engine but it can’t make a cake.’ (David Quantick, *Guardian*)

We Are Everywhere. On billionaire Peter Thiel: ‘Mr Thiel often references the sci-fi promise and optimism of the 1950s and 1960s. His favourite book is *Lord of the Rings*. He pays homage to the fantasy series in the Tolkienesque names of his various investment vehicles, such as Mithril Capital Management, named for the lighter-than-air mythical metal; Lembas, a secret-formula bread made by elves, and Rivendell One, a haven city for the forces of good.’ (*Financial Times*) But does he get menacing letters from the Saul Zaentz Company ordering him to stop this misuse of Tolkien’s terms?

Lauren Beukes’s *Zoo City* appeared in an *Observer* list titled ‘The 10 best contemporary African books’; a welcome change from lists of ‘The 10 best excluding that ghastly genre stuff’.

Ralph Macchio, actor, explains away his 1999 sf role in *The Outer Limits*: ‘I’m not a sci-fi guy – I know people who are nuts about the genre, but I don’t really get it, it’s not my thing – but it wasn’t really sci-fi or gross horror or anything. It was more scientific.’ (AVclub.com)

Court Circular. Warner Bros won its case against the heirs of Superman co-creator Joe Shuster, and continues to own all rights to the profitable superhero character. The ruling was that ‘Shuster’s sister’s decision to accept higher annual payments [a pension from DC Comics] created a new

agreement which cancelled any previous contract.’ (BBC) • A Californian court issued an order ‘denying Samsung’s motion to use devices seen in the films “2001: A Space Odyssey” and “Tomorrow People” to invalidate Apple’s design patents.’ (*Apple Insider*) It seems that for a ‘prior art’ effect on US patent law, you must actually invent something – here the tablet computer – and not just simulate it with cunning special effects. Alas.

Junot Diaz, Dominican-born author who used sf narrative devices in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), is to receive a US MacArthur Foundation ‘genius grant’ of \$100,000 a year for five years.

As Others Regulate Us. The UK government plans tax breaks for computer games using British characters and locations: ‘After lobbying from the producers of science fiction and fantasy games, which are often set on alien planets, the Government has proposed that stories which are “set in a location/world that cannot be determined” can be called culturally British. / Alien life forms will also be assimilated into British society. The proposed test says points will be awarded for lead characters “who are British citizens or residents or of a nationality/species that cannot be determined.” The games could be based around a UK “historical event”, showcase “British technical or creative innovations such as Artificial Intelligence” and embrace cultural diversity, including representations of disability.’ (*Independent*) So there’s a great incentive to design, say, a first-person shooter whose players must gun down wave after wave



of racially diverse and variously gendered wheelchair users during the Chartist Riots.

Monster Double. Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*, illustrated by Jim Kay, scored a first by winning both the Carnegie Medal for fiction and the Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration.

As Others See Us III. Malcolm Tucker (who?) summarises *Star Wars* in a few ill-chosen words: 'The one about the fucking space hairdresser and the cowboy. He's got a tinfoil pal and a pedal bin. His father's a robot and he's fucking fucked his sister. Lego. They're all made of fucking lego.' (BBC2, *The Thick of It*)

J.R.R. Tolkien, man of many commemorative plaques – there were already eight in places where he lived, stayed or just lived nearby – had another unveiled on 1 October at 2 Darnley Road, West Park, Leeds, where the family lived 1924–1926.

Loncon 3, the 72nd World SF Convention scheduled for 14–18 August 2014, will be the seventh held in Britain and the third in London (the first two were in 1957 and 1965). Full details at www.loncon3.org.

Thog's Masterclass. Reflux Dept. 'Fegan cursed, bitter anger at the waste rising in him.' (Stuart Neville, *The Ghosts of Belfast*, 2009) • 'His own breakfast came up promptly, and he lost himself in it for a few bites.' (Patricia McKillip, *The Bards of Bone Plain*, 2010) • Eyeballs in the Sky (Centre of Gravity Division). 'Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she almost took a step backward.' (Percival Everett, *Assump-*

R.I.P.

Neil Armstrong (1930–2012), the US astronaut who shared a special 1969 Worldcon award for the Apollo Moon landing, died on 25 August and was buried on the same day as Harry Harrison's cremation (31 August) – under a blue moon.

Waldo T. Boyd (1918–2012), US science/technical author who published one sf story in *If* magazine ('The Salesman', March 1953), died on 15 September.

Shirley Climo (1928–2012), US folklorist and author of 24 books of retold fables and fairy tales from many countries, died on 23 August; she was 83.

Michael Clarke Duncan (1957–2012), US actor best remembered for his Oscar-nominated performance in *The Green Mile* (1999), died on 3 September aged 54. Other genre credits include *Armageddon* (1998), *Planet of the Apes* (2001 remake), *Daredevil* (2003), *The Island* (2005) and *Green Lantern* (2011).

Michael Embden (1948–2012), UK landscape artist who in the 1970s and 1980s painted over 100 book covers, mostly for sf/fantasy titles (Poul Anderson, Gordon R. Dickson, Roger Zelazny et al), died on 21 August; he was 63.

Martin Green (1927–2010), whose one sf novel was *The*

Earth Again Redeemed (1977), died on 14 April 2010 aged 82.

Shulamith Firestone

(1945–2012), Canadian-born 'cyberfeminist' whose advocacy of new reproductive technologies such as artificial wombs in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) was influential in sf, died on 28 August aged 67.

Herbert Lom

(1917–2012), Prague-born actor whose career ran from 1937 to 2004 and who is best known for *The Ladykillers* (1955) plus a recurring role in the Pink Panther films, died on 27 September aged 95. Genre credits include *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1967), *Doppelgänger* (1967), *Count Dracula* (1970), *Dorian Gray* (1970), *Asylum* (1972), *Dark Places* (1973), *And Now the Screaming Starts* (1973), *Whoops Apocalypse* (1988) and *Masque of the Red Death* (1989).

Michael O'Hare (1952–2012), US actor most famed for his TV role as Commander Sinclair in *Babylon 5*, died on 28 September; he was 60. Further genre credits include the horror film *C.H.U.D.* (1984).

Wendy Weil (1940–2012), US literary agent whose authors included Karen Joy Fowler, Molly Gloss, Carol Emshwiller and James Morrow, died on 27 September.

tion, 2011) • Neat Tricks Dept. 'Her supple arms drooped to the floor and encircled the lamp overhead. Then her long legs joined in.' (Pavel Kohout, *The Widow Killer*, 1995; trans Neil Bermel 1998) • 'He saw that Kate was watching him with an expression that was half

puzzled, half irritated. He asked her if he could borrow it.' (Paul Bryers, *The Prayer of the Bone*, 1998) • Dept of Hirsute Versatility. 'He is forty years old, with a black beard shaped like a spade, a lawyer and a judge...' (Jo Walton, *Lifelode*, 2009)



JON WALLACE MOON DROME

SCORPUS **18th Year of Fear Racing**

The biggest party in the system is in full swing, somewhere above me, in the top decks of the sovereign vessel *Grimaldi*. A few hundred thousand hardcore Fear Racing fans are on the party deck, all getting thoroughly wasted on the journey out. The end of the season is upon us.

I crouch in my dark cube cell, wondering about the other racers in the hold. How many are sedated? How many are awake, like me, shivering in their cells and counting down the hours?

I would normally take a sed, just to escape the throbbing of the debt bolt in my neck, but that's all changed now. I have almost paid off my bond, and the debt bolt has shrunk so small it's barely noticeable. If I win tomorrow the debt and the bolt are gone for good.

So how can I sleep?

There is a noise that makes me jump. I hear shuffling footsteps and drunken chatter.

Favio. No mistaking the sound of my master. There is a shift and a click, and the cell hatch slips into its floor cavity. The cube is flooded with light. I peer through glowing spots and see Favio, holding a bottle of wine.

"Scorp!" he bellows.

What is he doing here? Owners never visit their teams before a race. It's bad luck. Favio squints, then draws his eyes wide, attempting to focus on the bottle.

"I've brought you the finest booze on the ship – which I'll grant you isn't saying much. I thought we could have a celebration, as it's your last race tomorrow."

"If I win, Sir."

"Ha!"

He snorts, struggling with the bottle top. "You're going to win. You know it and I know it. You won't lose now, not when freedom is so close. Not when you can reach out and touch it. Well, I say we toast what we have achieved together, Scorp. You have won me great kudos over the years."

Plenty of money too, but he doesn't mention that. The boss gets ninety percent of my winnings. If I get killed tomorrow he'll get my savings too, to finish off the remaining bond. That's the law. He presses the bottle into my hands – "Open this, would you?" – then eases his bulk onto the floor, so close I can smell the fried food and beer on his breath. He glances at my chains, as if surprised by them. I hand him back the open bottle. He swigs and peers around.

"You wouldn't know this is a party ship," he says. "Not down here. You should see it up top. Like the Last Days, it is."

The Last Days. When the Fear arrived in the system and laid waste to everything. Back then it was believed they wouldn't stop until everything in the system was dead. People lived every day as if it was their last. A lot did things they'd later regret. I don't regret anything, because I can't remember anything about that time. Prolonged racing burns out the long-term memory. It's something to do with the plug.

Favio belches and offers me the bottle. I have to remind myself not to drain the whole thing in

one go. I haven't tasted wine since they stabbed the bolt into my neck. Favio watches me.

"What do you want out of life, Scorp?"

"I don't know, Sir."

"I mean, will you keep racing? Afterwards?"

I sip again, tipping the bottle up to hide my expression.

"You and I are equals now," says Favio. "At least, we're both freemen. You can speak your mind. Surely you don't think I will try to stop you leaving my service? Your fame prohibits it, lad."

That's debatable. He waits for my answer. I drop the bottle and gasp in satisfaction.

"I honestly wouldn't like to say, Sir. It's bad luck to predict a win."

He snorts again. "Superstitious, eh?" He grabs the bottle off me and stands up, scowling. "You make your own luck, you damn fool."

He marches out, the cell sealing shut behind him.

GOVERNOR FAVIO MAXIM 11th Year of Fear Racing

I have been ripped off, that much is clear. I peer in a small observation window at the feeble, wasted figures inhabiting the holding cell. They stagger about blindly, or wriggle and twist on the floor. They all look quite mad.

I accepted them in part exchange, and now they are all rotting, struck down by a mystery sickness bred in their camp. We are still five days flight from home, and my ship, the *Fuzai Zihuan*, has no idea what is wrong with them.

Lucas, my Quaestor, seems worried. Well should she be. She inspected this lot before the trade. I try not to be angry with her. Everybody gets caught out now and then.

"How much to treat them?" I ask her.

She pretends not to hear me, which is a bad sign. "What?"

"Don't fuck about. How much?"

She clears her throat and folds her arms. "Too much, Governor. I suspect they're past saving. Besides, you know what the costs are like for treating out-world diseases. You'll end up paying double again just to clean them up."

"Oh God." I shake my head. "So it's a write off?"

She doesn't have to answer. I squint through the murky glass again, wondering what kind of god-awful stink fills the holding cell.

"Alright. We dump them, right?"

Lucas brightens a little. "Actually there is one item worth salvaging. During my examination I discovered a young man with a race-capable interface."

"Really?"

I'm surprised. Domestics rarely have even a basic plug.

"Yes, Governor."

I press my nose back to the observation window. "How did he get mixed up with this lot?"

"It seems he was a teacher and had a major upgrade. There was a huge education drive just before the Last Days – old government started handing out quite advanced tech to teachers. They could afford such things back then. He's not designed for racing but he's perfectly capable of plugging in, with a few modifications."

So it has not been a complete loss. Race-capable plugs are ruinously pricey.

"Alright. Get him treated and send him to school. Ditch the rest."

I turn away, thoughts turning to lunch.

"His wife is in there with him, Governor, shall I keep her too?"

I shrug. "Why?"

"They don't like being separated."

"He's about to become a Fear Racer, Lucas. He won't have long to be annoyed about it."

SCORPUS

18th Year of Fear Racing

Lucas removes my chains and pats me on the back. "Good luck, lad. We're all rooting for you."

I step through the hatch into the *Grimaldi*'s race pits, a mile-long strip of blood red, floodlit hangar, festering with steaming machine tools, pit crews, and our waiting chariots. A great cheer goes up from the spectator gallery, hundreds of metres above. My name is chanted, over and over. I salute my fans, whoever they are, and walk through the throngs of security men, mechanics and officials.

Floatcams follow us, buzzing like flies, broadcasting my every move on the ship's entertain-

ment system. They'll follow us around the Moon Drome too. We walk past pit after pit, white team, yellow team, red team, shivering racers staring into nothing. Security men press things into my hands to sign, and I make my mark for them. They think this junk will be valuable one day.

Perhaps it will. There has certainly never been another sport like Fear Racing. It's certainly one hell of a way for drunken free men to get some kicks.

A typical race sees a pack of chariots run the Moon Drome at lunatic speeds. The chariots are unarmed, but they are allowed to do anything they can to knock their competitors out of contention. This mostly takes the form of suicidal collision. But chariot racing was always like that.

The real reason for the popularity of Fear Racing is the Fear.

About eight years ago they stopped their attacks and withdrew into the atmosphere of Black Tortoise, the gas giant farthest from our star. There was no explanation, no ceasefire, no surrender, just a disappearing act.

Black Tortoise was the site of the Moon Drome. At first people thought the chariot races would have to be cancelled. Then some bright spark realised the presence of the Fear might actually sell more tickets. Now we run the same course as ever, around Black Tortoise's two large moons, Bacos and Libor. And every turn we make around the inner moon, Bacos, the Fear come out to play. They kill at least half the racers every time.

The fans like to think they're braving the danger too, travelling out to watch from the *Grimaldi*'s distant orbit, but the truth is the Fear never venture farther than Bacos. Nobody knows why, and nobody cares, so long as they keep their killing on this limited and entertaining scale.

I find my chariot waiting for me on the launch pad. It looks patched up and tired. A wave of panic, a sense of utter redundancy, briefly seizes me.

Officials are already here, completing their checks for bombs and viruses. I look out the transparent bay doors. I can see Black Tortoise, a growing dark pearl.

The officials declare my chariot safe and withdraw.

Safe. A ten-foot capsule strapped to an anti-matter engine. The pit team lift me inside and drown me in integrity fluid, plugging me in.

Four more laps.

GOVERNOR FAVIO MAXIM 12th Year of Fear Racing

We have parked the *Fuzai Zihuan* about ten days' travel from the Moon Drome, well within the safe zone, to train my new racers. We should have the nucleus of a new, ambitious Green Team by now. Instead Lucas has killed nearly half the recruits. My financial situation is extremely hairy, and the last thing I need is her wiping out what prospects remain in an obsessive quest for perfection. She reports another one dead this morning, so I visit the hold to inspect things for myself.

Three shivering bondsmen are lined up before me, naked and chained, heads bent by debt bolts. A large infoscreen hangs behind them, displaying incomprehensible diagnostic data about the trainee Lucas just killed. To our right is the transparent launch bubble, from where the ship deploys training chariots.

Lucas unchains one of the bondsmen and drags him through the launch bubble's membrane. She opens the training chariot, which looks little more than an oversize lozenge, and seals the meek but struggling man inside. Then she steps out of the bubble as the chariot glows blue, powering up.

"I don't know why we even bother with this," I say. "This training moon is nothing like the Moon Drome."

Lucas turns her attention to the infoscreen, watching the readouts reset and scroll anew.

"Of course you're right," she says. "This moon has none of the gravitational anomalies we associate with Libor or Bacos. But we have to find a racer who can at least make a turn. We can't just send out a lot of amateurs."

"Better than no team at all."

"We'll have a team."

I am getting pretty sick of the way she speaks to me.

There is a strange noise, like dirt dropping on a box. The training chariot shoots into space,

hurtling towards the training moon. We watch the infoscreen for a moment.

"He just made a course correction," says Lucas. "It's good."

All I can comprehend is the map, which shows a pulsing green dot drifting across a black space. We all watch it – Lucas, the two remaining bondsmen and I. The dot reaches the moon and begins curling around it.

"He's turning," says Lucas. "Hang on. I think he's messed something up. Hang on..."

The dot breaks free of the moon's orbit, streaking out into space, travelling away from us. There's no recovering it.

I stand up and spit.

"Brilliant. That's four you've lost me, Lucas. Are you trying to ruin me?"

She is about to reply, but I hold up a finger to silence her. I have noticed that one of the bondsmen, the one we picked out of the diseased batch, is staring at me. Lucas sees too, and takes the cudgel off her belt, stepping forward to administer a beating. The slave backs away, having probably felt the shock of the cudgel before. I am normally quite happy for Lucas to beat some discipline into the team, but not when we have so few left to work with.

"Hang on," I say. "Let's not ruin another one before we've even seen what he can do. Give him his shot."

She reluctantly reattaches the cudgel to her belt and drags him to the launch bubble, where the *Fuzai Zihuan* has another training chariot prepped and ready. The slave is sealed inside. Lucas steps out of the membrane, and the chariot spits out into space. We return our attention to the infoscreen.

Lucas watches the read-outs spin and churn. The green dot slingshots around the moon. The diagnostic data turns from blue to green.

"That looks good," I say.

"It really does," says Lucas, surprised.

So, we have a contender.

We'll punish him when he gets back.

SCORPUS 18th Year of Fear Racing

Twenty-eight other chariots move around me,

taking up position in orbit around Libor. There would be a twenty-ninth, but apparently his brain popped the moment he plugged into his chariot. It happens.

I wonder if the partygoers on the *Grimaldi* gave the death a second thought. Probably not. They will think the death made him glorious. Most fans believe this 'sport' is a noble expression of defiance, a tweak of the Fear's nose. Even Lucas seems to have bought into the idea of racers as desperate heroes, carving our names in history.

I surrender to the chariot's data stream, let the code crush and juggle my senses. My surroundings seem to melt away, and in a moment I have left my body behind. My senses become the chariot, the chariot becomes my senses. I am disembodied, floating around Libor, a phantom suspended over its scorched yellow surface.

"Welcome back," says the chariot.

"Thanks."

"So...four more laps and we're done. Happy about that?"

The question is loaded. The chariot and I have become a part of each other. When I quit racing they will break it up, and some part of me will die with it.

"Look, I have some hot news from the bookkeepers," it says. "Your win odds have worsened dramatically."

"Terrific."

I examine the race pack. As usual the Red and Blue teams have boxed around me. Probably planning a collision on the first burn. Such a move requires remarkable timing, and none have yet been good enough to pull it off.

Black Tortoise appears as we complete our orbit. The chariot develops a red marker to indicate the location of Bacos, and we chatter to each other about burn scenarios.

The go signal comes in. One of the Reds gets overexcited, burns too hot, and skips straight off into deep space. He's for the long, cold ride.

Our envelope arrives and I activate the AM engine. Two of the blue chariots immediately drop ahead and damn nearly strike me. I squeak between them, then glance back in time to see them clip each other and disintegrate.

I hurtle out of Libor's orbit, heading for Bacos.

The other chariots follow.

"Four more laps," says the chariot again.

GOVERNOR FAVIO MAXIM

12th Year of Fear racing

The elevator arrives at the *Grimaldi*'s party deck, and a blast wave of sound, stink and noise throws me back, making me gag. Partygoers block the exit, so I have to bring out the cudgel and beat a path through them.

The party deck is a two square mile cube of heaving, stinking bodies. Even the huge domed roof is crowded. Disc-shaped floatables nearly blot out the view of space, bearing richer men than I over we common folk below.

I notice a tall bondsman idling nearby, so I order him to get me up on his shoulders, where I can peer over the crowd and get my bearings. Through the smoke I can see that the bar is a nightmare. To my right are the giant screens. They are displaying the race odds but are almost obscured by bookkeepers on stilts, who lunge through the crowds, stooping here and there to take bets from fans.

I clamber off the bondsman, then wield the cudgel at a passing waitress, commandeering the drink on her tray. I down it in one draught, along with a few pills. You need something to steady your nerves before going deeper into the party.

I hack my way along until my cudgel loses its charge, and I have to fall back on my fists. It is hard going through the knee-deep refuse. Here and there an orgy has broken out, and I have to make a diversion. The music pounds in my ears. I am suffocating in the smog. How can anyone breathe in here?

"Fav! Up here!"

I look up. Memnon is sitting on a floatable, waving frantically.

Oh great. My only salvation and I owe him two million.

"Room for one more!" he yelps, lowering the floatable. A few drunks try to clamber on ahead of me, but Memnon's ready for them, kicking them clear with spiked boots. I get aboard and we rise up, over the throng. Memnon pours me a drink. He sits at the table alone, apart from a

domestic girl who has passed out beside him.

"Thanks," I say, brushing myself off. I see that some idiot has torn a hole in my blazer. There's also a stinking, brown palm print on my leg. I try to ignore it and straighten up. Can't afford to look flustered.

"So Fav, tell me about your man Scorp. Is he really as special as people say?"

I glance at my fingernails and sniff. "This is his sixth race. That tells you everything you need to know."

"But where did you find him? There's all kinds of rumours, you know. You've not been bending rules have you, old man? Didn't cultivate him in a tube, I hope? Ha, ha!"

I would tell him exactly what I think of that, but I have to smile and laugh at his idiotic jokes. I have bet heavily on a Scorp win. As owner of the *Grimaldi's* betting operation, Memnon knows that. If my wager comes off I'll have paid him back. If it doesn't I'll be his bondsman bitch.

The great bell sounds. A cheer goes up from the crowd below. One minute until the race starts.

"Uh-oh," says Memnon. "I don't mean to worry you but have you had a look at the betting recently?"

"I checked in my cabin," I say. "Why?"

"Things have changed. Look at that."

I turn. The bookies are retreating, and a gap has appeared before the nearest screen. Scorp, Green Team: 19-1.

"I hate to say it," says Memnon, "but it looks as if..."

He doesn't need to say it. Someone knows something I don't.

The giant screens dissolve to show a new image: thirty racers, clustered in burn formation around Libor, the quiet yellow moon. We watch them sit still for a moment, drifting. Then there is a great white burst, and the racers tear out of orbit, heading for Bacos. One ship hasn't moved. My heart is in my mouth, until I realise it's not Scorp. It's a blue team boat. The crowd jeers, laughs and curses.

"Don't look too relieved," says Memnon. "If the odds switch that quickly..."

He doesn't need to finish. The betting fraternity clearly believe Scorp is going to have a

problem. I sit in silence on Memnon's floatable, watching the race unfold. Two chariots collide on the straight before Bacos, but it's no-one I own. I see Scorp is leading the pack.

If it's going to happen, I think, it's going to happen now.

I see something. An almost imperceptible flash on Scorp's AM drive. A few others have noticed it too. There are some cheers, some angry screaming, then the crowd goes very quiet. Scorp's chariot is out of control. It shoots by Bacos, diving into the broiling black cloak of Black Tortoise's atmosphere.

I hold my hand up at the screen, as if to catch him.

The crowd mumbles, then growls, then erupts into cheering, sex and shooting. It's a party boat again.

"Chin up, lad," says Memnon. "They were bound to get him some time."

Memnon grins at me and pulls up his betting report, probably figuring out exactly how much I owe him. I could tell him, but I have other priorities. I jump up to my feet and leap off the floatable. A young couple break my fall for me admirably and I spring to my feet relatively unscathed.

"Favio!" yells Memnon. "Don't be foolish!"

Foolish Schmoolish. I kick and tear my way through the crowd. No-one's putting a bolt in my neck. Not without one hell of a fight.

SCORPUS

18th Year of Fear Racing

Nothing stirs on the first turn around Bacos. Normally a grid ship would appear, but today there is nothing.

"Strange to see them so quiet, isn't it?" says the chariot.

"I won't hold it against them."

The rest of the pack is a distance behind us. Two black chariots try to take out the red leader on the burn for Libor, but he's ready for them, producing a short reverse burn that sends the two blacks hurtling into each other. He flies through apparently unscathed, although the following craft aren't so lucky. One racer's AM drive inhales some debris that disagrees with it.

There is a large explosion, which takes out a few nearby chariots.

I make the second burn and head back for Libor, closely followed by the red leader. Two distinct groups hang behind. Everything running smoothly so far, although something is interfering with my onboard camera feed to the *Grimaldi*. No matter, it's nothing essential.

I plot the next burn swiftly. That leaves me with fifteen minutes to brood on the betting situation. This has happened before, and I am concerned. I look at the *Grimaldi*, a giant maggot floating through space. On board are thousands of fans who know something I don't.

"Have you noticed something funny about the pack?" says the chariot.

I return my attentions to our pursuers. The red leader is holding position in second. Behind him are the remnants of the chariots that survived the AM detonation – one fellow Green, one black, two more reds and two yellows. Then, some distance behind, are all four whites.

"What are they waiting for?"

"I don't know," replies the chariot. "But it's the first time I've seen a whole team hang back like that. They've performed some kind of minimal burn. Their timing will be all out of sync."

"Maybe it's some strategy for avoiding the Fear?"

"Maybe. Anyhow, I'll keep an eye on them."

We make the Libor turn and head back out. Lap two. The pack behind follows unscathed.

We make the second and third turns around Bacos without any trouble. Nobody tries anything. We fly almost in procession, probably because nobody can quite believe how quiet it is.

Where are the Fear? I feel strangely angry. They always attack. Why do something unexpected now?

We make the fourth Libor turn and head out to Bacos for the final time.

"Woah!" yelps the chariot, "Hang on!"

We make a couple of emergency burns. Two white team chariots hurtle ahead of us. I have been passed. It takes me a moment to gather my thoughts. How have they got past us from so far behind?

"That's impossible."

"Tell them that."

"They must be cheating. Where are the officials? I mean where are the damn officials?"

The whites have clearly made a triple burn, saving their fuel for one last super shot. Nothing wrong with that technically, except that it's not possible. Not without augmented engines. I am absolutely furious for a moment, until I run a few simulations on their burn and some semblance of calm returns.

"I think we're OK," I say. "They've screwed up. They won't have enough fuel to get home."

"I think that's the plan," says the chariot. "Check out the Drome info."

I check on the positions of the teams. Something grips my heart and squeezes. The whites are boxing me in. The two behind are making small burns, edging closer. The two ahead are braking, straddling the turn corridor. They're going to take me out as a group.

"An entire team on a suicide run," I say. "And the Fear aren't even showing up to make it hard for them."

The chariot says nothing, running and re-running simulations to see if there's a way out of this. After five minutes it gives me its professional opinion.

"We're fucked. I see what they're doing. They'll get tight with us in the turn corridor where we can't manoeuvre. One little touch will be enough. These boys are good."

We pass a minute in silence. Then something occurs to me. "What if we go the back way?"

I expect the chariot to argue. It is, after all, a terrible idea. It thinks for a moment, then speaks: "OK. Why not? We're dead anyway."

We frantically begin crunching the numbers. The whites pick up our plug activity and start closing in faster.

The back door is the volcanic north polar route. Tidal heating and an oddly thin crust over the northern plains have created a vast volcanic continent, where plumes of sulphur burst into orbit, unleashing a deadly hail of tephra and superheated silicates. Not a good place to take an AM drive – or any flying machine, come to think of it. But it's our only choice.

We plot the new course, then make a small burn. We lose the two white chariots ahead, but the two behind make compensating burns and

just manage to stay with us, traversing the pole. An eruption takes place a few miles to my right. I watch, stunned by its beauty. It looks as if an umbrella of fire has opened up over the moon.

"Well, will you look at that," says the chariot.

"Beautiful," I say.

"Not that," says the chariot. "That."

It magnifies the polar surface for me, highlighting deep cuts in Bacos' surface. "All this volcanism has created deep continental fissures. You could fly right under the surface. Isn't that amazing? You think you know a moon back to front and it can still surprise you."

"Never mind the sightseeing. Keep an eye on the – "

I see it too late. One of the pursuing whites is caught on the edge of an eruption and knocked into a powerful high-speed spin.

It barely clips us, but it's enough to knock us out of Bacos' atmosphere, spinning uncontrollably into space. I scream at the chariot for help, but it's silent.

Then I see the Fear. A great black grid ship is hanging in space, as if awaiting me.

Then the plug dies, and I am suddenly a man again. A thin, helpless old man, drowning in integrity fluid, screaming for help in the darkness.

GOVERNOR FAVIO MAXIM

12th Year of Fear Racing

The only good thing about the *Grimaldi*, I reflect, running down an unlit, echoing passage, is its abundance of hiding places. The thing is huge. I'm told it's bigger than any of BT's moons. Memnon built it during the Last Days as an ark, to evacuate the system.

It was going to be his great achievement: leading his people to the Promised Land. He was selling a lot of tickets, until the Fear withdrew into Black Tortoise, to sit there waiting for who knows what.

You have to hand it to Memnon. He builds a planet-sized ship only to find all demand for a mass evacuation gone. It should have ruined him. So what did he do? He went and invented Fear Racing, and more than doubled his money.

I always wanted to be like that – enterpris-

ing, and filthy rich. Instead I am running along an abandoned passage in the dark. And why exactly? What am I hoping to achieve? This is Memnon's ship, after all. His people are following me already. I suppose it's the animal in me, desperately seeking out survival.

I turn a corner, then trip and twist my ankle, crying out in pain. I try to stand but dizziness forces me down.

I sit there moaning until two of Memnon's Quaestors catch up with me. They drag me back the way I came, my arms pulled around their idiot bull necks. My fingers trace the swell of their debt bolts. Each is the size of a plum. Mine, presumably, will be large enough to qualify as a second head.

I am taken back to the party deck, which is still buzzing. A section has been cleared around the dormant screens. Memnon waits in the centre, smiling. For the first time in a long time, I am truly afraid.

"Favio. Welcome back. Did you have a good run? I think you forgot something..."

He holds up my race slip, then turns and beckons to an official stood behind him.

"Tell me, son, what does our friend here owe me?"

The official makes a show of examining the slip. "Combined sum of twenty-eight million, your honour."

Memnon raises his eyebrows, still smiling. "Twenty-eight? My, my. I can honestly say that's the largest debt we've ever seen. And tell me, what are my options, as the aggrieved party?"

The official bows. "Under the terms of the Burgess provisions, you may take out a bond on the individual, or you may release him of the debt."

"Hmm," says Memnon, rubbing his chin and grinning. "Release or bond...release or bond."

I have a feeling I know where this is going.

SCORPUS

18th Year of Fear Racing

I wake up, expecting that old familiar pull of chains, but discover I am unbound, lying on a cushioned recliner. I hold up my arm, checking that it's still there. My hands are clean, even under the fingernails. The yellow stains have

been washed away. I am wearing a clean robe.

"Scorpus."

I turn my head. A woman is sitting by a small, circular pool, her legs dangling in the water.

"Where am I?"

She smiles at me. "Don't you know?"

"Right. The Fear ship."

"That's correct."

I stare at her for a moment. She is beautiful, in a strange way. High cheeks, full lips, big brown hair. Only the eyes give away that something is very wrong about her.

She cocks her head to one side, the smile vanishing. She drags her legs up out of the pool, then pulls them up before her, regarding her toes as if for the first time.

"You don't recognise me do you, Scorpus?"

"Have we met?"

"Once, a long time ago."

I sit up. I have the definite feeling I am being manipulated. Six years of slavery gives you a sense for it.

"Why don't you tell me what you want?"

She throws her head back and laughs. Well, you might call it laughter. She stops as suddenly as she began.

"You spoke exactly the same words last time."

I look into the cold, watery eyes, but not for long. Something about the way they sit in that face makes me feel sick.

"OK," I say, "let's stop playing games."

"Why would we play games?"

"Because that's what you do. When you're not killing you play cruel games."

"Games imply frivolous entertainment. We can hardly be accused of that."

"What else do you call sitting out here in a gas giant? What else do you call taking part in Fear Racing?"

She looks confused. "Taking part?"

"You come out to fight every time we race. I call that taking part."

She shakes her head, stands up, stretches and yawns. "It is much more than that. The fact is, Scorpus, we are here to educate you."

I laugh. It's a strange thing to do when I am this afraid, but out it comes, a heaving, raucous laugh that leaves me breathless. I go on for what might be five minutes, until eventually I can

speak again. I wipe the tears away and gasp.

"Don't you have anything better to do?"

She doesn't seem amused. "We came here to reacquaint your kind with fear. Your species had grown proud and idle. It was stagnating. It needed to be shown the way back."

"Back where?"

"You know where," she says, stepping forward now, the curve of her breasts accentuated in the shifting gown. "We have shown that you are helpless against us. We ended our attacks because that point had been more than made. We have remained here, around what you call Black Tortoise, to teach your kind more...intimate lessons."

"And I fit in how?"

She steps over to a kind of locker that is built into the stone wall. She brings out a cooled bottle of beer, flipping the top off and handing it to me. I snatch it and drink, gasping with delight. She smiles, then reaches into the locker again. This time she is holding what looks like a small, black rock. I recognise it immediately as a G bomb. Powerful enough to blow the *Grimaldi* sky high, let alone my little chariot.

"Do you recognise this?"

"It's an explosive."

"That's right. Don't be concerned, it's deactivated. Do you know where we found it?"

I drain the rest of the beer and shake the empty bottle at her. She obliges, producing another from the locker and handing it to me. I drink half in one draught, wondering if I have time to get drunk before she kills me.

"I imagine you found it on my ship."

"That's correct. On your ship. And who do you think planted it there?"

I shrug. "Could be one of a few thousand suspects."

"It was Favio," she replies. "The owner of your team."

As soon as she says it I know that it is true. She hands me the device. I sip at the beer and consider.

"How do you know that?"

"We have agents on the vessel *Grimaldi*. One of them planted it, timing it to detonate on your final turn around Bacos. His orders came from Favio."

I stare at her body, desiring it, then remember that she can't be real. Nobody, after all, even knows if the Fear are human. For all I know I'm talking to a five foot lizard in a woman suit. Pretty suit though.

She cocks her head to one side. "You don't seem affected by this news."

I toss the G bomb back to her. "What do you want me to do? Write a letter?"

"It doesn't disturb you? That even after all you have done for him, he should try to kill you?"

"There was a good chance hed try. I was going to make him look bad."

"You have no wish to avenge yourself?"

"On who? Him or you?"

She steps behind me and leans down, breathing onto my neck. She holds the G bomb in front of me. "We want you to take this back to him, Scorpous."

I turn and look up at her. That neck is well within kissing distance. "You want me to blow up the *Grimaldi*?"

"That is the action, but not the whole. We could have destroyed the *Grimaldi* any time if we had wished." She circles, crouches before me. "When we first arrived here we knew that attacking your planets would not be enough to make you humble. Fear Racing, as you call it, is your kind's attempt to defy us, to rediscover your confident strut.

"We have played along until now, happy to see that curious self-contentment grow and wriggle to the surface. Now, with your help, we will destroy it for good. When you, the hero of your people's greatest sport, blow up the *Grimaldi* it will be a hammer blow to your kind's foolish pride."

I wave the empty bottle at her, but she doesn't move this time. I stand up, needing to get clear of her hypnotic neck. I open the locker and find shelves loaded deep and full with beers. I withdraw another.

"That's why you let me go – all those years ago. You wanted me to become a legend."

She nods, her eyes closed, as if a slow pupil has at last grasped a simple concept. "Only you had the potential. You are a truly gifted pilot, there is no doubt, but you would never have survived this long without our...assistance."

"You've been letting me win."

"Correct."

I sip the beer and consider. "And in gratitude for this patronage I'm supposed to blow my brains out?"

She draws close to me again, rests a hand on my shoulder. "You have nothing left to live for," she says. "The sport even took your memories. The only lasting record you have of a time before racing is the debt record on your bolt."

I look away, staring into the pool.

"I don't need memories," I say. "Whatever I've lost is best left that way. I'll happily forget this little encounter for a start."

"You don't want the memories back because you don't want to face the truth."

I snarl. "You don't know anything about me, freak."

"So you would have those memories back if you could?"

"Why, are you offering?"

She smiles. "It is easily done. The memories are still there. It is simply your ability to recall them that is damaged by your race plug. Here, let me show you."

An almighty pain stabs in my head. I drop to my knees, cradling my head, the pain much worse than any plug. Then, suddenly, it stops.

I open my eyes, and recognise that the Fear woman standing before me is my wife – or at least a very decent impersonation of her. I cry out. Five years' pain gushes out of me into the chamber. I crawl to her. She's smiling.

"You don't want to live, Scorpous. You've known that for years, you've just forgotten why. I am sorry to remind you, but it was necessary."

She kneels down by me, grabs my hands in hers, and holds them up to her face.

"You can avenge her, Scorpous. You can avenge her. Will you help us?"

Her voice is soothing. Her scent is home. Her fingers run through my hair.

"Let me stay here with you."

"You know this isn't real."

I gasp, wiping tears away. She kisses my cheek. This close her pupils are clear and fluid like water.

"What do I need to do?"

GOVERNOR FAVIO MAXIM

12th Year of Fear Racing

"Sorry, Scorp," says Lucas, "but you're forcing us to do this."

Scorpus screams, as Lucas feeds the blue worm into his nose. I look away as it wriggles inside. I suppose I should be guilty, but instead I feel nothing but elation.

Memnon was just about to plunge a debt bolt into my spine when Scorp's signal reactivated, his chariot emerging from Black Tortoise like my guardian angel. The Fear had killed every other racer, and as Scorpus completed the race within the allotted time, he won after all. My wager held. I have paid off my debt to Memnon and pocketed a sizable sum besides. I feel great. My problems are over.

Scorp's are just beginning. Trouble is, he can't explain how he got back, and Memnon has whipped the officials into a paranoid frenzy, claiming he might be some kind of Fear agent.

This is of course, nonsense. Memnon is epically pissed not to have me as his bondsman, and insists we interrogate Scorpus out of nothing more than petty anger. He wanted to use the cudgel, but Lucas suggested the worm as a safer alternative. It burrows into the hippocampus, scrambling the mind, but loosening up memories. It should help us determine if Scorpus came into direct contact with the Fear.

Scorpus screams as the worm burrows into his brain. Memnon stands next to me, scowling.

"We should just kill him," he says.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Twenty other teams have offered to buy Scorp from me already. The offers are getting ridiculous now, but I've turned them all down. Memnon and I both know that I have a star on my hands – the first real celebrity Fear Racing has produced. I intend to keep him as long as possible.

Memnon clears his throat. "I'll give you fifty for him," he says.

"Oh, now you want to buy him? Five minutes ago you wanted him dead."

"Alright," says Memnon, "I admit it. I'm jealous. Seventy-five."

"I've already turned down an offer of two hundred," I snort.

"Should we continue?" asks Lucas. Scorp looks terrible. His eyes have rolled back in his head.

"Continue," says Memnon. "As President of Fear Racing I am expected to be thorough in ensuring our security."

"Hoping we'll have a problem, aren't you? Too bad," I say, glancing meaningfully at Lucas. "My Quaestor here has assured me Scorpus will survive."

Lucas looks nervous, until Scorpus opens his eyes. He looks around, slack-jawed and empty eyed.

"Scorpus," says Lucas. "You're back on the *Grimaldi*. Scorp, we need to know. What did you see back on Black Tortoise?"

"Nothing," he says. "Made the repairs. Left."

"What else do you remember? Anything at all?"

Scorpus grins and dribbles, leering at Lucas. "I remember you."

She strikes him hard.

"Hey!" I yelp. "Watch how you treat my star racer!"

She holds up a hand. "My apologies, Governor."

Scorpus doesn't seem to mind. He's giggling now, staring at the ceiling.

"Scorpus," says Lucas, softly now. "Do you recall anything else about Black Tortoise? Anything at all about the Fear?"

He doesn't even look at her. He stares and licks his lips like a simple child, muttering a woman's name.

"Alright," I say, nudging Memnon. "Satisfied? Can he carry on racing or what?"

Memnon shrugs. "Very well... I'll not withdraw your licence. However, I want him kept on a short leash, do you understand? This idiot is just a little bit too lucky for my liking."

"Luck's got nothing to do with it."

Memnon leaves us. Lucas opens the worm retrieval tool – a long, flailing tentacle thrashing on a metal base.

"You might want to go elsewhere for this bit, Governor," she says, kneeling down by the senseless, babbling Scorpus.

I take her advice and leave. I'm halfway down

the corridor, thinking about a cocktail, when the screams begin again.

SCORPUS

18th Year of Fear Racing

"So..." The chariot doesn't know what to say. The Grid ship has departed, leaving us floating in the black clouds of Black Tortoise. I am fully plugged in. The interface seems to be operating well. I run a few tests to be sure.

"How are you feeling?"

"Oh, you know," says the chariot, "as well as can be expected. When we lost the plug I thought that was that. But I see we've had...some help."

I look around the storm clouds, searching for the grid ship, but see nothing. Even so, I have the sense that they are watching us.

"Exactly what the hell happened?"

I feel exhausted, barely able to answer.

"They reminded me about my wife."

"You were married?"

"That's right. I forgot about it. Now I remember loving her very much. Favio blew her out the back of the *Fuzai Zihuan*, like she was garbage."

"Why?"

"She was ill. I was too, but my plug made me valuable enough to cure."

There is a silence. It occurs to me that we are still not moving.

"Work up the drive, will you? We need to plot a course back home."

"In a minute," says the chariot. "First, tell me why the Fear wanted to remind you of that."

Favio planted a bomb on us before we left, as a final bit of insurance. He doesn't want to see me go free. The Fear gave me the device – want me to use it to blow up the *Grimaldi*. They seem to think it will make a terrific statement. End Fear Racing for good."

"Why would you do that?"

"What?"

"Why would you blow yourself up when you're about to be set free?"

"I suppose they figure I have nothing to live for. That's why they showed me my wife I think – to remind me why everything feels so empty."

"So...you're going to do it?"

"I don't know. Look, start up the drive OK? We

need to move if we're going to finish."

The chariot starts warming up, and we chat-ter about burn scenarios. Things, for a moment, could almost be normal again. We begin to move out of BT's clouds, where we can get a signal and catch up with the Drome info. Red leader looks like he's going to take the race.

The chariot prepares for a burn. I brace myself for the kick of the engine, but nothing comes.

"Do you really want to stop Fear racing?"

"I don't know," I reply. "What does it matter? What does anything matter?"

"You do know," says the chariot. "You forget we're plugged into each other. I just can't tell what's giving you more of a kick – the idea of killing the sport or killing Favio."

"I'll get both when I blow up the *Grimaldi*," I say.

"You want to kill all your fans too? All those civilians? Why?"

If I could punch something I would.

"They deserve it, that's why. They're quite happy to watch me die. Why shouldn't I enjoy killing them?"

"You're going to do it," says the chariot. "You're going to do what the Fear asked."

The chariot is right. I am going to do it. I wonder briefly if the Fear have brainwashed me in some way, made me an unwitting agent – then realise that I don't care.

"Once I'm standing face to face with Favio, I'll detonate the bomb. I need to make sure the thumb cameras get it all in high definition though, so everyone in the system knows who did it."

"That's the plan?"

"That's right. In fact the more we talk about it, the more I like it. Enough talking. Make the burn."

Nothing happens.

"There's another way," says the chariot. "Can I explain it to you first?"

I'm too tired to argue.

"Bacos," says the chariot. "It'll be reachable if we burn in ten minutes."

"So?"

"So, do you really think that blowing up the *Grimaldi* will stop Fear Racing? You think that nobody else will step up to fill those shoes, to

make all that money flow again?

"And what about the other slaves? There are twice as many bondsmen as free men on that ship – they didn't blow your wife out an airlock. They're just people."

I curse and begin trying to bypass the chariot's control.

"Wait," it says. "Listen – those fissures on Bacos – they burrow deep down into the moon – all the way to the crust in some places. If we were to fly down one of those, then set off the G bomb..."

The override kicks in. I twist the chariot, pointing it on a bearing for home, but I don't make the burn. I sit and think, expecting the Fear grid ship to emerge at any moment, enraged by my delay.

Bacos is moving into the right position. I reactivate the chariot data stream.

"OK," I say. "I get it. Make the burn."

We shoot out, aiming for the moon's volcanic pole. No Bacos, no Moon Drome. No more Fear Racing. No racing at all.

I watch the plumes blooming over the landscape as we draw near. The only beautiful thing in this stinking part of the system, and I am going to blow it up.

GOVERNOR FAVIO MAXIM

18th Year of Fear Racing

I only relax when I'm safely aboard the *Fuzai Zihuan* and well clear of the *Grimaldi*. If it weren't for the confusion after the explosion I doubt I'd have made it off alive. When your racer destroys the entire Moon Drome, an entire industry, you very quickly lose friends.

I have never seen a moon explode before. It was beautiful in a way, watching the surface glow, split and blow apart. At first fiery cracks crept across its surface, boiling orange, then white. Then the pole popped free of the moon, blowing debris in all directions. The *Grimaldi*'s defences took out the most threatening rocks, but couldn't stop everything. There were impacts on all floors. A lot of high-paying fans have died.

I am certainly not popular. But who needs them now? The sport is as dead as *Scorpus*. So be it. I was tiring of it anyway. I have made all

the money I need.

I sit in my quarters with a bottle of wine and shake my head, barely able to comprehend it. I tap into the navigation log to see how long it will take us to get home.

Curiously, we seem to be headed back to the *Grimaldi*. At speed. I hit the comms channel.

"Lucas? What's going on? Have you left your keys or something? I'm not a popular chap on that ship, you know."

There is no response. I try to raise her a few more times, without success. Furious, I leave my quarters and head for the bridge.

The doors open. The first thing I notice is the *Grimaldi* on the infoscreen, a white maggot hanging in the sky. The second thing I notice is that they are shooting at us.

Lucas is sat in the pilot's seat, flying evasive manoeuvres. I rush over to her, grabbing her by the shoulder.

"You crazy bitch, what the hell are you doing?"

She whips around. Something sends a furious shock through my body, dropping me to the ground. I lay there, unable to move, biting so hard I will surely shatter my teeth. Lucas stands over me, wielding her cudgel and smiling.

The *Fuzai Zihuan* politely informs us that our AM engines are brewing up. Unless we do something there may be a large explosion. The *Grimaldi* is getting larger outside, its defensive fire closing on us. A few shots hit, but it's too late – we are going to fly right into the *Grimaldi*'s party deck by the look of it. Our engine explosion will do far worse damage than a few pieces of moon rock. We'll take out the whole damn sovereign vessel.

I spit and snarl, hardly able to believe my luck. Lucas is still grinning.

"What the hell are you doing, Lucas?"

She kneels down, the smile leaving her face. Her eyes make me shiver.

"I'm here to educate you."

Jon Wallace lives in Muswell Hill, London. Recently married, he divides his time between writing and hardly believing his luck. This is his third story in *Interzone*. He recently signed a three-book deal with Gollancz, and his novel *Barricade* will be published in 2014. Follow him on Twitter @Jon_Wallace.



the Flower of Shazui
Chen Qiufan

translated by Ken Liu

*Summers in Shenzhen Bay last ten months.
Mangrove swamps surround the bay like
congealed blood. Year after year, they shrink
and rot, like the rust-colored night that hides
many crimes.*



ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER



To the east of the mangroves, north of Huanggang Port between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, is Shazui Village, where I'm staying for now.

I've hidden here for half a year. The subtropical sun is brutal, but I've grown even paler. The five urban villages, Shazui, Shatou, Shawei, Shangsha, and Xiasha – or, literally, Sand Mouth, Sand Head, Sand Tail, Upper Sand, Lower Sand – form a large, dense concrete jungle at the heart of Futian District. The names of the villages often give one the illusion of living in the mouth of some giant, mythical monster named Sand which, while separated from the head, remains alive.

Big Sister Shen tells me that this used to be a sleepy fishing village. But with the economic reforms and the opening up of China, urbanization brought construction everywhere. To get more compensation when the government exercised its eminent domain powers, villagers raced to build tall towers on their land so as to maximize the square footage of the residential space. But before they could cash in, real estate prices had risen to the point where even the government could no longer afford to pay compensation. These hastily erected buildings remained like historical ruins, witnesses to history.

The villagers built a story every three days, she says. Now that's what you call the Speed of the Special Economic Zone.

I imagine these buildings, growing as fast as cancer cells, finally settling into the form they have today. Inside the apartments it's always dark because there's so little space between the buildings that tenants in buildings next to each other can shake hands through the windows. The alleyways are narrow like capillaries and follow no discernible pattern. The stench of rot and decay permeates everything, sinks into everyone's pores. Because the rent is cheap, every kind of migrant can be found here, struggling to fulfill their Shenzhen dream: the high-tech, high-salaried, high-resolution, high-life, high-Shenzhen.

But I prefer this lower-end version. It makes me feel safer.

Big Sister Shen is a good person. She's originally from the Northeast. Years ago, she bought this building from a native family that was moving overseas. Now she lives the life of a happy

landlady. With the rent rising daily, her net worth must be in the tens of millions, but she still lives here. She took me in despite the fact that I had no identity papers, and gave me a small booth to practice my trade. She even prepared a fake file for me in case the police ever show up. She never asks me about my past. I'm grateful, and I try to do a few favors to repay her.

From my booth at the door of the Chinese medicine shop, I sell a combination of body films and cracked versions of augmented-reality software. Body films are applied to the skin, where they display words or pictures in response to the body's electrical signals. In America, they use the technology as a diagnostic tool, monitoring patients' physiological signs. But here, it has become part of the street culture of status display. Laborers, gangsters, and prostitutes all like to apply the films to prominent or hidden parts of the body so that, in response to changing muscle tension or skin temperature, the films can show various pictures to signal the wearer's personality, daring, and sex appeal.

I still remember the first time I spoke with Snow Lotus.

Snow Lotus is from humid, subtropical Hunan, but she decided to name herself after an alpine flower. Even at night, her pale skin glows like porcelain. Some say that she's Shazui Village's most famous 'house phoenix' – a prostitute who works out of her home. I often see her walking and holding hands with different men, but her expression is always composed, with no hint that anything sordid is going on. Indeed, she exudes an allure that makes it impossible to look away.

Shazui Village is home to thousands of prostitutes at all price levels. They provide the middle- and lower-class men of both Shenzhen and Hong Kong with all varieties of plentiful, cheap sexual services. Their bodies are like a paradise where the tired, dirty, and fragile male souls can take temporary refuge. Or maybe they are like a shot of placebo so that the men, after a moment of joy, their spirit restored, can return to the battlefield that is real life.

Snow Lotus is not like any of the others. She's Big Sister Shen's good friend, and comes often to shop at the Chinese medicine store. Every

time she passes my booth, her perfume makes my heart skip a few beats. I always try to restrain myself from following her with my eyes, but I never succeed.

That day, she tapped my shoulder lightly from behind. “Can you help me fix my body film? It won’t light up,” she said.

“I can take a look.” I had trouble hiding my rising panic.

“Follow me,” she whispered.

The dim stairs were as narrow as intestines. Her apartment was nothing like what I had imagined. The color scheme was light yellow, decorated with many homey, warm details. There was even a balcony that allowed one to see the open sky. In Shazui, this was a real luxury.

She led me into her bedroom, and keeping her back to me, she slid her jeans down to her knees, revealing a pair of blindingly white thighs and black, lacy panties.

My hands and feet felt cold. I swallowed with difficulty, trying to moisten my dry throat.

Snow Lotus’s elegant finger pointed to her panties. I was still not ready. My heart was full of fear.

“It won’t light up,” she said. She hadn’t taken off her panties. She was just pointing to the octagon-shaped film depicting a *bagua* that was applied right above her tailbone.

I tried to disguise my disappointment. Carefully, I examined the film with my diagnostic tools, doing my best not to pay attention to her smooth, silky skin. I tweaked the thermal response curve of the capacitance detector. “It should be okay now. Try it.” I let out a long-held breath.

Suddenly, Snow Lotus began to laugh. The almost-invisible hairs around the curve below her waist stood up, like a miniature patch of reeds.

“How am I supposed to try it out?” She turned around to look at me, her tone teasing.

I believe that no straight man in the world can resist that look. But in that moment, I felt insulted. She was treating me as just another customer, a consumer who exchanged money for the right to make use of her body. Or perhaps she thought that this was how she’d pay for my

services? I didn’t know from where my childish anger came, but without saying another word, I took out a heating pad and held it against her waist. After thirty seconds, the yin-yang symbol in the middle of the *bagua* lit up with the character for ‘East’, glowing with a blue light.

“East?” I asked, not understanding.

“That’s my man’s name.” Snow Lotus’s expression was back to being calm and composed. She pulled up her jeans, turned around, and saw the question on my face. “You think a prostitute should have no man to call hers?

“He likes to take me from behind. I put the film here to let all my customers know that they can mount me if they’re willing to spend the money, but there are some things that they cannot buy.” She lit a cigarette. “Oh, how much do I owe you?”

I felt a sudden, inexplicable sense of relief.

The man named East is Snow Lotus’s husband, and also her pimp. His business involves traveling between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, smuggling digital goods. Others tell me that he’s addicted to gambling. Most of Snow Lotus’s earnings are lost by him at the gaming table. Sometimes he even forces her to service some older Hong Kong customers with...special desires. But even so, she still wears his name on her waist, declaring that she belongs to him.

This is such a cliché that it reminds me of many old Hong Kong gangster movies. But that’s just daily life in Shazui.

Snow Lotus is unhappy. That’s why she often comes to Big Sister Shen for help.

Like many in Shazui, Big Sister Shen also has multiple jobs. One of them is shaman.

Big Sister Shen claims to be a Manchu. Some of her ancestors were also shamans, she says, and so she has inherited some of their magical powers, enabling her to speak to spirits and to predict the future.

One time, when she was a little drunk and in a talkative mood, she described the great empty deserts of the far north, where one’s breath turned to ice, and where her ancestors had once performed magical ceremonies dressed in ferocious masks, dancing, twirling in the blizzard, drumming and singing, praying for spirits to

take over their bodies. Even though that was a hot day, with the temperature hovering near forty degrees Celsius, everyone in the room had shivered as she told her story.

Big Sister Shen never allows me to enter the room where she performs her magic. She says that because I don't want anything, my heart isn't pure, and so I will harm the atmosphere for the spirits.

An endless stream of customers comes to seek her services. They all say that she has real Power – one look, and she can tell everything about you. I've seen the people who leave her room after the magic sessions: their faces are filled with a dreamy look of satisfaction.

I've seen that expression many times: young women carrying their LV Speedy bags, wealthy urbanites on the hunt for beautiful women at the V Bar of the Venetian, politicians who appear on TV every night for the six-thirty Shenzhen News – all of them wear that same expression on their faces, a very Shenzhen expression.

They are like the johns who come to Shazui every day. They go to the Chinese medicine store for some extra-strength aphrodisiac and then reappear with a confident smile. But I know that the aphrodisiac contains nothing but fiber, and it has no effect except causing them to shit regular.

In this city, everyone needs some placebo.

Snow Lotus comes to Big Sister Shen again and again. Each time she leaves as if enlightened, but soon after she returns, her face full of unhappiness. I can imagine the kind of troubles that someone like her must endure, but I can't help wanting to know more. I have many technical ways to satisfy my curiosity, but they all require that I set foot first in Big Sister Shen's room. I know that the only way is to become a disciple.

"I need the aid of spirits," I tell Big Sister Shen. I'm not lying.

"Come in." Big Sister Shen has seen countless men. She can spot a liar from a mile away.

The room isn't big and it's dimly lit. On the wall I can see paintings of shamanistic spirits, the chaotic brush strokes probably the result of a drug-addled brain. Big Sister Shen sits in front of a square altar covered by a red flannel cloth. On top of the altar are a mask, a cowhide drum,

a drum whip, a bronze mirror, a bronze bell, and other ritual implements. An electronic prayer machine begins to recite sutras. She puts on the mask, and through the hideous eyeholes I can see an ancient and alien light in her eyes.

"The Great Spirit is listening," she says. Her voice is low and rasping, full of an indisputable sense of dignity.

I can't resist her power. There's a story locked away in the darkest corner of my memory, but it has never ceased to torment me. Sin is like wine. The more it is hidden from sunlight, the more it ferments, growing more potent. Suddenly, I startle awake. My subconscious has been playing a trick on me. It's not curiosity about Snow Lotus that caused me to step into this room, but the inner desire to be free of repression, to seek relief.

"I'm from outside the Fence. I was an engineer." I try to control my breathing, to steady my voice.

I'm from outside the Fence. I was an engineer.

Back in 1983, before I was born, a barbed-wire fence 84.6 kilometers long and 2.8 meters high was built to divide Shenzhen into two parts. Inside the Fence is the 327.5 square kilometers of the Special Economic Zone, outside is a wilderness of 1600 square kilometers. They say that the purpose of the Fence was to provide some relief for the border checkpoint between Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Before 1997, when Hong Kong was ruled by Great Britain, there used to be many waves of illegal border crossings.

The Berlin Wall never truly fell.

The Fence and its nine checkpoints separated not only people and traffic, but also different systems of law, welfare, tax benefits, infrastructure, and identity. The area outside the Fence became Shenzhen's 'mistress'. Because of its proximity to the Special Economic Zone and its vast tracts of undeveloped land, it attracted many labor-intensive though low-value-added industries. But every time 'outside the Fence' was mentioned, a Shenzhener's first thought was of the deserts in Hollywood westerns: a poor, backwards place, where the roads were always under construction, where running red lights had no consequences, where crime was rampant and the police powerless.

But history always surprises us with similarities. Shenzhen also had its own version of the taming of the West.

In 2014, the government's decision to finally tear down the Fence received unprecedented opposition. Shenzheners living inside the Fence believed that they would be overwhelmed by migrants from the other side and suffer increased crime. But those living outside the Fence opposed it even more. They felt that they had been abandoned by those inside the Fence back when the Special Economic Zone grew, and now that development had run into a wall due to the scarcity of developable space, they would be exploited for their only resource: land. If unopposed, increased rent and prices would drive the low-income population out of their homes. Young people even dressed up in Native American garb and tied themselves to the Fence to prevent it from being torn down.

The factory where I worked was one of the electronics manufacturers affected by the change. Every year, we relied on orders from Europe, America, and Japan for augmented reality gear components to earn foreign currency. At the same time, our margins were being squeezed by the declining value of the dollar against the yuan. If commercial rent and wages also rose, then there would be nothing left for profit. The owner announced at an all-hands meeting that everyone should be prepared for layoffs.

I was a mold engineer. I wanted to do something to make as much money as I could before I was let go. Everyone thought that way.

Our clients gave us prototypes for unreleased products so that we could design the molds ahead of actual production. Following strict NDAs and security procedures, RFID chips embedded in the prototypes sent out signals at 433 MHz, and communicated with dedicated receivers through a proprietary over-the-air protocol. If at any time a prototype left a designated area, an automatic alarm would sound. If the prototype wasn't returned to the designated area within 300 seconds, the machine would activate a self-destruction mechanism. Of course, if that were to occur, the factory would lose all international credibility and be blacklisted by clients and get no more business.

Throughout the Pearl River Delta, experienced and crafty buyers solicited secret prototypes at high prices. Getting their hands on such prototypes and reverse engineering them would bring these *shanzhai* electronics manufacturers tens of millions in profits. These days, getting rich unethically was easier than running an honest business.

I had lined up everything: a willing buyer, a price, a way to deliver the goods, and an escape route. But I still needed one more thing, a helper, someone to divert the attention of the crowd and lure away the security guards. I couldn't think of anyone better for the job than Chen Gan, who was also from my hometown.

I understood Chen Gan. He was a shy young man. His wife had just given birth to their second daughter, and he was worried about how he would be able to afford his first daughter's elementary school tuition. As a migrant, he could not have his household registration in Shenzhen and had to pay an extra fee for his daughter to go to the regular school. Without that money, he would have to send his daughter to a different school, a low-quality place set up for the children of migrant workers. He would often look at a picture of his little girl and say that he didn't want her to repeat the path he had walked.

I made a deposit into his bank account: not too much, just enough to cover the extra fee for the school.

For the Chinese, what reason could be more compelling than 'for my child'?

At the agreed-upon time, I heard the sound of loudspeakers outside my building. I knew that Chen Gan was already playing his role. In the middle of the yard, he had covered himself in gasoline and held a lighter in his hand. He declared that if the owner didn't pay him enough severance, then he would light himself on fire. As security guards rushed anxiously into the yard with fire extinguishers, no one paid attention as I took the emergency stairs up to the roof, clutching the stolen prototype.

I was one of only five individuals in the factory authorized to touch the prototype. Taking advantage of opportunities afforded by my duties, I had tested the RFID trigger mechanism several times. The logs appeared to only record

the latitude and longitude of the device, but not the altitude. This hole allowed me to devise an effective method of delivery to the buyer.

On the roof, the wind blew strong and cold, like the moment before the first drops of rain. Almost all the workers in the factory had congregated in the yard to watch how the self-immolation drama would end. If the owner gave in to Chen Gan's demands, tomorrow, hundreds more would be waiting for him, doused in gasoline.

But I'd known the owner for three years. He was the sort who would encourage Chen Gan to go ahead and use the lighter, and then he would light a cigarette from the smoldering pile of ash.

A dragonfly-like remote-controlled helicopter approached from afar, humming, and landed on the roof. Following directions, I tied the prototype to the bottom of the helicopter. Unsteadily, it began to rise. I anxiously watched this fragile machine, on which the lives of two men, and perhaps of even more, depended.

The maximum communication distance between the RFID chip and the receiver was about sixty feet. The roof was already close to that limit.

The helicopter hung in the air as if waiting for more direction. I didn't know how the buyers intended to deal with the self-destruction mechanism or if they were going to crack the communication protocol and substitute in a false signal to fool the device. That was all beyond what I could control.

For a moment, I thought the helicopter might never leave. But it did eventually leave the roof, and then disappeared into the grey sky.

Calmly, I rode the elevator down and squeezed myself into the gaping crowd. I made sure that Chen Gan saw me. He nodded almost imperceptibly, gave me his trademark shy smile, and dropped the lighter.

The security guards were on him immediately and wrestled him to the ground.

It was time to leave, I thought.

I got on the intercity bus to Dongguan. But before the bus had even started its engine, my phone began to vibrate insistently. Given what I knew about the owner, I never would have had much time. But I hadn't expected to be caught so quickly.

Maybe it was the closed-circuit cameras, or maybe Chen Gan sold me out. But I didn't care any more. I just wanted him to be all right, to live long enough to see his daughter go to school.

I threw away my phone, got off the bus, and got on the bus going the opposite direction, inside the Fence, into Shenzhen. Instinctively, I knew that was the safer direction.

This was how I came to be in Shazui Village.

For the last half year, I've tried every which way to find out news about Chen Gan, but have heard nothing. I thought I was sufficiently indifferent, indifferent to the point that I could abandon my useless conscience. But often I would awaken in the middle of the night, breathless. In my dreams, Chen Gan, smiling his shy smile, would burn and turn into a pile of ashes. Sometimes I would even dream of his two daughters, crying, burning with him, also turning into ash. I knew that I could no longer hide from myself.

"Please, tell me if he's all right." My face is full of tears even though I don't remember crying.

The wooden shaman mask glowers at me with its round eyeholes, orange light reflecting off the surface. The face is that of an angry goddess. Through the eyeholes I can see a strange glint in her eyes: blue sparkling flashes, very high in frequency.

Suddenly I understand. The mask is nothing more than a fucking well-made disguise for a pair of augmented reality glasses.

All this time, I've thought that Big Sister Shen is just a fraud pretending to be a medium and making her money by telling her clients what they want to hear. But she actually has real power. Guessing conservatively, her information privilege level must be set to at least level IIA or above, giving her the power to access an individual's private file based on facial recognition.

But even so, without professional grade analysis filter software, how can she glean any useful information out of that torrent within such a short time? It would be like finding a needle lost in the sea. I can only credit her shaman genes, like Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* being able to tell how many matches are in a box with a single glance.

The lights behind the eyeholes flash faster. My

heart accelerates.

"He's doing well."

Hope rekindles in my heart.

"At least there he no longer needs to worry about money." Big Sister Shen points towards the sky. Then she adds, "I'm sorry for your loss."

I suck in a deep breath. Even though I was expecting it, now that the fear has settled into reality I still feel a deep helplessness. The whole world seems to have lost focus, and nothing can be relied on.

I know that in this world, there's only one thing I can do to try to atone, even if it will provide only illusory comfort for my conscience.

"I want a working bank account number for Chen Gan's family."

Money was once my placebo. Now I no longer need it.

It's dark by the time I leave Big Sister Shen's room. I look around at Shazui, where lights are just being turned on behind windows. People are bustling every which way, filling the air with hope. But my heart is like a dead pool of water. I open my hand. Emptiness.

My subconscious has played another trick on me. I did indeed install the bug below the rim of the altar. I thought I was there for Chen Gan, but in the end I couldn't forget about Snow Lotus.

I smile, a Shenzhen-style smile.

Snow Lotus doesn't look well.

Her face is pale. She's wearing large shades that cover her eyes and half of her face. Without speaking to anyone, she goes straight to Big Sister Shen's room.

I put on my headset and turn on the receiver. After a static-filled moment, I hear the sound of the electronic prayer machine.

"He hit me again." Snow Lotus's voice is tearful. "He said that I haven't been turning enough tricks. He needs more money."

"This is your own choice." Big Sister Shen's voice is calm, as if she's used to hearing this.

"I should go with that Hong Kong businessman."

"But you don't want to leave him."

"I've been with him for ten years! Ten years! I was once a girl who didn't know anything, and

now...I'm nothing but a cheap whore!"

"You want another ten years just like these?"

"Big Sister... I'm pregnant."

Big Sister Shen is quiet for a moment. "Is it his?"

"Yes."

"Then tell him. You're bearing his child. You cannot be a whore any more."

"He'll tell me to abort it. This is not the first time. Big Sister, I'm getting old. I want to keep this child."

"Then keep it."

"He'll kill me. He will."

"He won't." Hearing your own voice from the air as well as the headset is a very odd sensation. I'm standing at the door to the room, watching a surprised Snow Lotus turning to look at me. Her face is as smooth as porcelain, except for her swollen, bruised right eye. My fists are squeezed so tight that the nails puncture my skin.

Here's my plan. Even though it's against my original aim, I have to admit that it's the most likely to succeed.

Her husband is addicted to gambling. He's also like every other gambler under the sun: superstitious. We need to allow him to make a connection between his child and good luck. *For my child.* My heart feels a tinge of bitterness.

Every morning, Snow Lotus will mumble a string of meaningless numbers as if talking in her sleep.

Her obsessive husband habitually seeks inspiration for his bets from anything: whether it's the colors of the Teletubbies, or the phone number on advertising brochures. Then he'll discover that she's mumbling the winning lottery numbers from the day before.

Snow Lotus will tell him that she had a strange dream: she dreamt that a beautiful rainbow-colored cloud floated out of the east and drifted into her belly.

After seven days of this, we'll come to the best part of the show.

My professional skills will finally come into use. I'll arm Snow Lotus with wireless earbuds and augmented reality contact lenses. But the key will be a special black unitard. At first glance, it looks like regular long underwear, but

specially designed fibers will deform and harden when electrically charged, resulting in precisely defined areas of tension and force, strong enough to stop a bullet.

With the addition of an array of electrodes and a communication chip, I can turn the unitard into a remote-controlled puppet suit, allowing me to pose the wearer into any position.

"Why do you want to help me?" Snow Lotus asks. She still thinks that men are only interested in her body.

"For karma." I laugh. Big Sister Shen often says this to her customers. With the remote control, I direct the unitard-wearing Snow Lotus into various sexy poses.

"Without any clothes, I can pose even better."

I lower my head, pretending not to hear. I continue to fiddle with the controls. Suddenly, like a warm cloud descending from the sky, two soft, pale arms are wrapped around my chest. Her voice is against my back, fills my chest, my heart, my lungs, flows up my spine into my eardrums. The voice seems to come from the bottom of my heart, and also seems to come from very far away.

"Thank you," she says.

I want to say something, but in the end I say nothing.

Big Sister Shen and I are seeing what Snow Lotus is seeing.

After the dim stairs, we come to the familiar, pale yellow apartment. The man named East is sitting in front of the TV, watching horse races in Hong Kong, cursing all the while. Snow Lotus walks into the kitchen, preparing to make dinner.

The picture suddenly becomes still. Then a man's two arms are wrapped around her breasts, like the way she had held me.

"Don't," she says.

The man does not answer. The picture suddenly shakes, and now her face is close to the faucet, her head lowered into the sink. The faucet is on, and the water rises, covering the vegetables and the fruits before draining into the overflow hole with tiny bubbles. Now the picture begins to shake rhythmically. Then come the heavy breathing, sighing, and the occasional moaning.

I can turn off the video and audio feed, but I don't. I observe all this almost grimly, experiencing a mixture of anger, jealousy, and disgust churning slowly in the pit of my stomach until they merge into a single feeling. I struggle to imagine what Snow Lotus is feeling, especially since she is making not a sound, not a single sound, while all this is happening under the gaze of two outsiders.

Finally, she finds some relief. She closes her eyes.

In the semidarkness, blurry patches of light penetrate her eyelids and tremble lightly. A hand is on my shoulder. It's Big Sister Shen. She sees and knows all.

We wait until midnight. I can hear even, rhythmic snores coming from next to Snow Lotus. I lift her left hand, indicating that I'm ready. She clears her throat in response.

Now begins the fake séance.

I manipulate the puppet suit and lift her legs high up; then, I make her torso rigid and drop her legs, using them as a lever to lift her upper body off the bed. Then I let her body drop, bouncing her legs even higher. Switching thus between potential and kinetic energy, the rigid body of Snow Lotus soon behaves like a coin striking hard ground, quickly bouncing and making a frightening ruckus against the bed.

"What the fuck is the matter with you? It's the middle of the night!" The man, rudely roused from slumber, feels for the bedside lamp and turns it on. Then, with another great noise, the man named East is bounced off the bed onto the floor.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" His curses are full of fear and shock.

As she continues to bounce, Snow Lotus's body seems to no longer be restrained by gravity. She is like a puppet pulled up by invisible strings. Up, down, up again, she springs from the mattress. For a moment, she seems to be floating in air. The yellow ceiling comes closer, and then recedes, like some kind of breathing membrane. The edges of our vision show signs of barrel distortion as the membrane relaxes.

"That's enough." Big Sister Shen puts a stop to my madness. Our goal isn't to scare this man

away. I have to admit that controlling Snow Lotus's body is addictive, as though it compensates for something subconsciously.

The amplitude of the bounces lessens. Snow Lotus's body is once again quietly lying in bed. I relax the fibers in the puppet suit. Now she is spread out like a floppy corpse.

Just like we planned, she begins to cry. Babbling incoherently, she describes her nightmare and the strange news.

"It...it says that if we take care of it, it will repay us, like with those lottery numbers..."

"Who is it?"

"Your child."

The man gets up from the floor. His face is wooden, as though he has been overwhelmed with too much information. He holds in his hands a fruit knife that he grabbed from somewhere. Approaching Snow Lotus, he caresses her belly, and then lifts his head to gaze into her face. Under the warm glow of the lamp, this seems like a happy scene from a soap opera. Next will come the promise to welcome new life, followed by the deep kiss of love.

The glimmer in his beautiful pupils suddenly turns cold, dark, like a pool of black water.

"The doctor told me that my sperm is no good." Slowly, he rubs the flat of the knife across her belly. "Now tell me, whose bastard is this. Then, get rid of it."

"It's yours." Snow Lotus's breathing is now very rapid. Her voice trembles on the verge of tears.

"You think you're the Blessed Virgin Mary? You fucking whore!" He slaps her, hard. The picture tilts. The dressing mirror shows two silhouettes. The composition is perfect in the dim light.

"It's yours," she repeats, her voice weak.

The knife is now right in front of her face, the thin, sharp edge glowing with a cold light. I can no longer sit and watch. I lift Snow Lotus's hands, grab his wrist and the knife handle, and turn the knife around, pointing it towards his own chest. He's unprepared for her speed and strength, and doesn't know how to react.

Snow Lotus's entire body leans forward, pushing the tip of the knife towards her husband's chest.

"Stop!" Big Sister Shen yells. But I'm not doing

anything. It's Snow Lotus. I don't even have a chance to restrain her.

The knife, with all of Snow Lotus's weight behind it, sinks into the man's skin, through muscle and ribs, through his heart. Crimson liquid oozes out of the wound and spreads, like wild flowers. He looks up, gazing past Snow Lotus, as though he sees an existence even darker, further away, until the last light of life disappears from his pupils.

The picture stays still for a while. Stunned by the sudden turn of events, we don't know what to do. Snow Lotus suddenly begins to run. Everything in front of us is shaking violently. She runs towards the balcony, towards that patch of open night sky.

This time I don't miss. Before she leaps into nothingness, I restrain her. Snow Lotus stops like a frozen flower and falls heavily against the floor. Angrily, she screams, struggles, and finally howls in desperation.

Death is the best placebo.

In this instance, I agree with this view.

Sirens shatter the dawn in Shazui Village. Accompanied by the police, Big Sister Shen and I walk through the crowd and duck into the police car. Snow Lotus is sitting in the back of another car, handcuffed. From the side, her porcelain cheeks are lit alternately by flashes of blue and red. She does not lift her head.

Eyes lowered, the roar of the engine in her ears, her silhouette trembles, blurs, and then disappears in the distance.

I recall the first time I spoke with Snow Lotus, and I begin down the long road of regret.

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Ken Liu's own short fiction has won the Hugo Award and Nebula Award.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SHIPS

CAROLINE M. YOACHIM

Kaimu dug his skis into the snow and forced himself onto the steeper slope along the edge of the run. Michelle was behind him, and there wasn't far to go. He was going to win.

A white-furred creature stirred at the sound of his approach. It rose up from the snow and stared, paralyzed, directly in his path.

The safety mechanism on his skis activated, but it was too late to turn. Instead, the skis treated the creature as though it was a ski jump. Kaimu landed, and the safeties shut off.

Several meters up the mountain, Michelle knelt in the snow. "You hit an Earther."

Impossible. Before he left the *Willflower*, the tourist board had assured him that the glacier-covered Canadian region wasn't populated. All the native Earthers were in a temperate band near the equator.

"*Hominid Class 304. Organic component...100 percent.*" Michelle transmitted her initial assessment to the rest of her collective, pausing briefly upon the discovery that the creature had no upgrades. The rest of her transmission was a stream of numbers relating to the creature's condition. All Kaimu gleaned from the numbers was that the creature wasn't dead. Yet. Blood stained its shaggy white coat and seeped into the icy powder. Kaimu stepped off of his skis. Cold seeped through his ski suit and chilled his feet. He trudged up the hill, kicking his toes into the powder.

"Can you save it?" he asked.

"Twenty-eight percent. My training is neurosurgery, and I've never worked on anything one hundred percent organic before." Michelle's gaze was locked on the two parallel gashes in the creature's torso, but most of her mind was elsewhere, searching for the knowledge she needed. To her, this was a problem, a challenge. He wondered if she was enjoying it.

Michelle turned away, and Kaimu stepped in for a better look at the injured Earther. Despite its blood-matted fur and diminutive stature, it was undeniably human. She, Kaimu realized from the gentle curve of her hips. She was undeniably human. Her fur was downy and short, more silver than white. The coarser, whiter fur that covered much of her body turned out to be clothing, cut from the skin of an animal. He shuddered.

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"You're in my way." Michelle nudged him aside. She'd reprogrammed one of her skis to the smallest size, still unwieldy, but small enough to hold in one hand. She drew the sharp edge along the Earther's outer furs, cutting away the clothing. Unable to see, Kaimu extended sensory tendrils, tapping into Michelle's visuals and trying to grasp the severity of the injuries.

"Too distracting," Michelle informed him. She banished his consciousness into a memory cache.

In the memory, there are three consciousnesses in Michelle's body. Michelle, of course, and Jasmine, who isn't so bad. Elliot, however, Kaimu finds deeply disturbing. Not the man himself, but the idea that Michelle is part male. Or that another man is in his girlfriend's head. Kaimu tries to tangle himself only with Michelle, but the three are so intertwined he has no choice but to dissolve into all of them.

Kaimu recognizes the memory. He's on planeteide leave on Nova Terra, and it's his first time visiting Michelle at work. She's been easing him into her life. It's a new experience for her, to share herself without drawing him into her collective. It's new for him, too.

Michelle reviews patient data files while she waits for him to arrive. All around her, Hospital617 buzzes with activity. In physical space, the hospital is a cavernous room. One floor, no walls. In headspace, there is more privacy, walls that give the illusion of each patient having a separate room. As part of the staff, Michelle doesn't bother uploading the headspace sensory inputs. Through her eyes, Kaimu can see the entire floor. Specialists of all sorts hover over their patients. Most of the work is upgrades – body reconstruction, routine anti-mortality treatments.

Neurosurgery team 8 to 27-12.

The woman in bed 27-12 is old. Not in the sense that Kaimu is old; his age comes from time dilation from his trips between the stars. Her skin is wrinkled and blotchy, and her hair has thinned so he can see the top of her scalp. She is frail, her body is giving out.

Kaimu sees himself weaving across the hospital floor. He feels his kiss on Michelle's cheek. Hears himself ask if she's busy. She tells him yes, but stay anyway. So he does.

She goes back to the woman. Elliot crowds his way to the foreground with patient information. Noelani Lai. A flood of datapackets swirl around the name: age, medical history, anything that might be relevant to selecting a treatment. Jasmine dilutes herself into the hospital archives, matching Elliot's patient data to other surgical cases. The mini-collective reconvenes and decides that the woman's body is inoperable. Insufficient regenerative capabilities. Instead, they will re-wire her organics to allow her consciousness to disengage itself. She can be installed into a new body later, if she so desires.

Michelle peels away layers of skin and cuts through Noelani's skull. The tissue beneath is predominantly organic, with traces of ancient wiring. More primitive than Kaimu. As a navigational officer, he's had to upgrade to interface with the *Willflower*.

Michelle blends with Jasmine and Elliot so thoroughly during the surgical procedure that Kaimu can't find Michelle at all. They become Jasmine/Elliot/Michelle. Jem. As the surgery progresses, the sight and smell of Noelani's organics become mildly nauseating. The Smart-Dust that sterilizes the air leaves behind odor-causing particles because sometimes a strange smell can serve as a diagnostic tool.

Kaimu is relieved when the operation is finished, and he can pick out strands of Michelle again. She doesn't bother to replace the slice of skull she removed, simply folds the skin back down over the wound.

Noelani floats out from her organics and into the vast interconnectivity beyond. Unused to such freedom, she loses cohesiveness, still existing, but commingled with the larger world. Jasmine observes, and notes the response as normal. Twenty-five percent of patients who are absorbed in this way eventually re-cohere. The remainder pursue a less individualized existence. Jem declares the operation a success.

Michelle – the realtime Michelle on the mountain – has shown him what she wants him to see, but now there is something he wants *her* to see. Awkwardly, since he isn't used to manhandling other minds, he takes control of the fractional portion of Michelle that led him here. He binds them to the hospital recording of a young

woman. The woman is Noelani's granddaughter, Amy.

She hurries through the maze of hallways, filled with an overwhelming sense of worry. Not for Tutu, but for Mom. She remembers Tutu from her childhood, an energetic woman with long black hair who held her hand in Southside Park while they fed energy chips to the mechanical ducks. They'd gone every time Tutu came to visit, from the time she was two until the time Amy decided she was too old for ducks.

In the pre-op room, Mom is holding Tutu's hand. Mom's eyes are swollen and red, but dry. When she sees Amy, fresh tears roll down her face.

"Tutu," she says. "Tutu, wake up. Amy is here."

Amy puts her hand on Mom's shoulder, half a hug because Mom can't turn away from Tutu. "It's okay, Mom."

"She was awake. An hour ago," Mom says. She pushes gently against Tutu's shoulder. "Your granddaughter is here. Amy."

Amy takes Tutu's hand. It isn't the strong hand that she remembers from her childhood. The surgeons wouldn't fix her body; even Amy could see that Tutu was too old. They would save her by putting her into the collective, and she would be absorbed and lost. Amy can't bring herself to say her goodbyes out loud. The words would be too final, and her voice would fail her. Instead she squeezes Tutu's hand and thinks the word, *goodbye*.

Kaimu withdraws, taking Michelle with him. They drift back to themselves, and the warm hospital air shifts to the biting chill of the mountain. He has to pause and collect himself. Michelle doesn't acknowledge his return.

"That memory meant nothing to you," Kaimu said, disappointed.

"You used my access rights to get a hospital recording of a private individual. Those are only supposed to be used in the event of a malpractice suit." She tried to sound stern, but Kaimu could tell that she was more amused than angry. "Besides, I've seen it before. Outdated minds thinking outdated thoughts."

"Human minds thinking human thoughts," he snapped back.

"I never said the minds weren't human." Her voice was quiet, sad. As though he had missed something, had failed some test. Her sadness diffused his anger, and he let the argument lapse into silence.

The Earther's eyes were open, pale blue like the color of the sky diluted with white snow. They reminded him of his son, Kenji, before he disconnected from his body. He'd been six years old. Kaimu had married and divorced a few women in the centuries since, but he never fathered any more children. Michelle was right, he was outdated. He shook the memory away. The Earther's eyes didn't move except to blink. Her right eye was clouded over by a cataract.

While his mind had been locked away in the past, Michelle had finished work on the lower gash. Now she reprogrammed bits of her ski suit to serve as bandages. She pulled strips of suit from the back of her neck. Kaimu supposed that the thick curls of her hair would block the icy air.

Michelle buried her hand wrist-deep into the upper gash. There shouldn't have been room, the Earther's torso was small. She must have pushed all the organs aside. Orbs of blood dotted the blue-green fabric of her ski suit. The fabric refused to absorb the stain, so the globules floated like crimson buoys on a tropical sea. So much blood.

"Any updates?" he asked. She wasn't transmitting assessments anymore. Maybe more of the collective was in her head now, eliminating the need to broadcast.

"You're not helping," Michelle responded.

This time, Michelle sends him to a memory in his own perspective. He recognizes where he is from the functionality of the space. Every inch is utilized, cozy and enclosed, but not cramped. He is cradled in the mind of the *Willflower*, his ship. He's far more comfortable here than he was in the hospital. At least, he is until he realizes when she's sent him.

He is in the aft lounge. A group of passengers is gathered around the bar, downing colorful fruit-and-alcohol concoctions, killing time until they have to get into the stasis tanks. There's an iridescent blue shiproach on the counter, and everyone places wagers on which dimensional

coordinates it will take off from. The shiproach scurries about, seemingly uninterested in flight.

Off to Kaimu's right, a section of the wall moves. His brain adjusts to recognize Dahnjii, his least favorite of Michelle's collective. Dahnjii is a collective within the collective, like Jasmine/Elliot/Michelle but with seven minds mashed together. He is trendy and arrogant. His genes are spliced with chameleon or octopus or some other long extinct creature so that he can change color at will. He's been hiding against the wall, and now he ripples with yellow stripes. Aggressive. Nearly all the members of Michelle's collective seek novelty, but Dahnjii goes out of his way to make other people squirm so he can study their reactions.

"Hey precious," he sneers, "want to join my collective?"

Kaimu doesn't know whether he means his mini-collective, or the collective he shares with Michelle. He wants nothing to do with Dahnjii, regardless. "No, thanks."

"You realize how dumb it is, to be with Michelle, and not the rest of us," Dahnjii continues. He's been in the med-ward for several days, and Kaimu isn't thrilled that he's back in circulation. "Like loving an arm."

"An arm isn't conscious, it's not the same."

"Fine, like loving an arm, and the little blob of brain that controls it." Dahnjii turns his head. The left side of his skull is gone, replaced by a clear dome. The surgery he's had done is a brain-shaping, purely cosmetic. Instead of the normal folds of gray cortex, his brain has been molded into the form of a dragon.

"I'm getting it colorized tomorrow," he says. Then he lifts the dome that covers the brain. "Want to lick it?"

Kaimu backs away, as though the exposed tissue will leap out and attack him. Dahnjii laughs, sticks his hand into his skull, and pets the dragon with one finger. The lounge has gone silent as all the drinkers admire the unusual design of Dahnjii's brain. Novelty. The shiproach takes off, and Kaimu is the only one to notice.

"Cover that up. Nobody wants to see your little lizard," Kaimu says.

Dahnjii's fist smashes through his face. It is a strange sensation, almost painless despite the

sickening crunch as splinters of bone are pushed into his brain.

The safety protocols of the ship lock down his mind. There are several seconds of blackness. The Michelle fragment skips him forward through time.

He is in his cabin. A few paces away, Michelle studies his most prized possession, a bonsai tree. It is centuries old, with roots that curl around a smooth gray stone before disappearing into a shallow layer of soil. The bonsai comes from a simpler time.

"If you lived in that time, you'd be dead by now. Or horribly disfigured."

Michelle is in his head, monitoring him. He resents the intrusion.

"Okay, okay, I'm out," she says, "I had to make sure the reconstructive surgery was successful."

"That was barbaric," he says. "Bastard could've killed me."

"There's a copy of your consciousness stored in the *Willflower*, so even if the body had been inoperable, I could have generated another manifestation, started from scratch. It would've taken longer, but death wasn't really an issue. Dahnjii doesn't like you, but he's not a monster."

"After what he did to me? How much of my brain did you have to regenerate? How much of my face?" He's practically yelling at Michelle, despite the fact that she probably spent the last hour or more putting him back together.

Michelle transmits the surgical data. She's regrown seven percent of his cortex, mostly frontal lobe, and reconstructed his nose and his left eye. This isn't the first time Kaimu has been badly injured. Over the years, almost 45 percent of his brain and body have been replaced. He doesn't feel any different.

"If you have a ship," he says, "and you replace it, one board at a time, and all the while it sails – is it still the same ship?"

The problem is from ancient philosophy, and it takes her a moment to find the appropriate reference. "Sorites. But the ships weren't sentient then. It wouldn't matter."

"It matters to me. Whether it's the same ship, and whether this," he waves his arms up and down his torso, "is the same body, the same brain."

"This attachment to your organics, it's pretty neurotic. You know that, right?" Michelle puts her hand on his cheek. She means it in a caring way, not as an insult. "And while I don't like what Dahnjii did, it's not as vicious as you make it out to be. Not to him. Not really to me either, except that I know how much it bothers you. Dahnjii's just upset that we're here on the *Willflower*, in bodies for the whole trip, rather than going on the *Roving Never* and getting new bodies when we arrive at Earth. He almost left the collective over it. So now he's frustrated and bored –"

"So it's okay that he smashed my face and sent bone shards into my brain. Because he was bored." How could Michelle refuse to understand?

"No. It's okay because it's just organics. Haven't you ever smashed your fist into the ship's interface console when you were frustrated?"

"That hurts my fist and doesn't damage the ship," he counters. "But yes."

"Have you asked the ship how she feels about it?"

"She's a ship."

"And you think *we're* the barbarian."

Something happens, not in the memory, but in realtime. Kaimu can sense it through Michelle's fragment. He tries to go back, but Michelle resists.

Kaimu is certain that something is wrong. Michelle is stalling him, keeping him off the mountain. He flings his consciousness forward through the memory cache, against her resistance. She lets him reach the point where they are preparing to ski, early that morning in their temp-lodge at the top of the mountain. The lodge is programmed with red walls adorned with replicas of ancient Japanese art – delicate cherry branches in black and pink, stylized blue tidal waves, bold black characters done in flawless calligraphy.

Michelle doesn't care whose perspective he takes for this memory so he settles into his own mind. He sits on a bamboo floor mat and yanks on the legs of his ski suit, trying to push his toes up into the stiff boot bottoms.

"That's ridiculously antique," Michelle says, "and I have plenty of paint. You're sure you don't want some?"

Michelle is fresh out of the shower, naked and holding a jar of N-body Paint. Her skin is pink from the heat of the shower. The color of cherry blossoms. Sandy-brown freckles splash across her chest, trailing down her arms and up her neck. He loves it when she wears the freckles.

"Well?" she asks, holding up the paint.

"No, I'll wear this." He points to the suit. Uncomfortable as it is, at least his private parts won't flap around while he skis.

"Suit yourself," she says.

Michelle orders up a cushion, and sprawls herself across the squishy blob that emerges from the floor. Comfortable, she opens her jar of paint, and applies it to her legs with smooth strokes. Kaimu halfheartedly tugs on his suit, but his attention is focused on Michelle.

She's programmed the nano-fiber paint to a shifting pattern of blues and greens – sunlight filtering through ocean waves. She paints her way down her thigh, coating the indented curve on the back of her knee, the swell of her calf. By the time she gets to her foot, he's dropped his ski suit, and simply stares at her, making no effort to dress himself. She knows he's watching, and takes her time, painting the ticklish arch at the bottom of her foot, then swirling paint around each toe.

He takes the bait and stands up, his legs encased in the suit to mid-thigh, but the rest of the suit dangling down.

"You'll get pretty cold, skiing like that."

"You'll get pretty ravished, teasing me like that."

"I'll get pretty ravished *after skiing*, you mean." She's finished her legs now, and starts painting her way up from her hip. "I'm already painted from the waist down."

"I can think of a few ways to get that stuff off."

"But you won't," she says, "because you're a gentleman, and I enjoy the anticipation."

"You enjoy teasing me all day."

She laughs. "That too."

Kaimu watches himself suit up. The Michelle fragment apologizes, but doesn't explain why.

Kaimu flies down the slopes, skis skimming over fluffy snow. Michelle is behind him, taunting him to go faster. Adrenaline pumps through

his system and mingles with an urge to impress her. He gives up on turning and points his skis straight down, letting the pines whiz by in the periphery of his vision. Single trunks blur together, their individuality stolen by his speed. He is the wind in air that stands still. Tendrils of his mind reach backwards for Michelle, to share with her this beautiful chaos of falling.

The green wall of treeness to his right closes in, swerves in front of him. Fear replaces excitement and he cannot turn. A single tree separates itself from the others, unmoving despite his speed because it stands directly before him. It looms over him.

Against his volition, his feet shoot upwards and sideways, twisting his body inside the ski suit. He hears the smack of skis on wood. A glancing blow, the safeties on the skis automatically avoiding a harmful collision. His skis reconnect with the snow, back under his control, slowed now, and traveling at an angle to the slope, redirected by the tree. Michelle lets out a whoop behind him, as though he'd skidded off the tree on purpose, a trick to impress her. He slows to a stop, and turns in time to see her mimic his trick, intentionally and far more gracefully. She stops on the hillside above him, spraying him with snow in the process.

"Good trick," she says, smiling.

He relaxes after that, knowing that the skis can rescue him from his own ineptitude. In short order, they reach the bottom of the mountain and cuddle together in the a-grav chute that propels them back to the top. From above the tree line, he can see mountains in every direction, monuments of ice and rock reaching up to the sky. "Down the other side this time?"

"Race you, meet up at that rock," she says, and dumps the coordinates to his navigation system.

"You'll win."

"I'll give you a head start."

"Okay, I –"

"Go!" She gives him a little shove, sending him over a ledge and onto a steep mogul-covered slope. The skis recognize his inability to deal with the bumpy conditions, and swerve through the bumps. He gets the hang of it, and before it flattens out the safeties turn off again.

Now me! Michelle is too far away for speech,

so she transmits. There's no way he'll win with such a tiny lead.

Well, he can at least make it challenging. He bends his knees, tucks down to decrease his wind resistance. A smattering of trees dot the slope as he gets lower, then denser trees close in around the run. He watches them carefully this time, scanning the slope ahead of him so he'll have plenty of time to turn. Avoid the green. Michelle hasn't passed him yet. He risks a glance, and she's farther back than he expected. If he can avoid plowing into the trees, he might even win.

The run curves, and Kaimu turns to follow it. He can see the rock in the distance, and Michelle is still behind him.

Something moves.

He'd have seen it sooner, but it was white and he was watching for green. It's running out across his path. The skis slash sideways.

The safeties on his skis are old, and to avoid overloading them, he'd simplified the obstacle-detection by specifying that he and Michelle were the only humans on the slope. His breath sticks in his chest as the blades tear through fur and flesh. It is worse in memory than in realtime.

Finally, Michelle releases him.

The Earther was dead. Her unfocussed eyes reflected the empty sky. Kaimu's freshly relived memories mingled with the realities of the present.

"You should have let me stay," he told Michelle.

"You wouldn't have understood what I was doing," she said. "You don't understand what's happening now. Look."

She pointed to the Earther, to the wound that stretched across her chest. Several ribs had been broken away. Her heart and lungs were rearranged, shoved off to the sides to gain access to her spinal cord. Blood pooled in the cavity. Michelle had never tried to save the Earther's body. All along, she'd been working her way down to the spinal cord. Trying to pry the consciousness free before the body died.

"She's completely organic. Why would you even try?" he asked.

"You started organic," she said. "All it takes is time. Time to map the pattern of neuronal connections, time to record the firing patterns."

"But we're on a mountainside, you used a ski to cut her open for god's sakes," he said. "You should have operated on her body. How could you possibly record everything you needed to save her consciousness? And even if you could, she'd never make it on the network."

Michelle held up her arm. There was a cut on her wrist. "I reprogrammed some of my peripherals to do the recordings."

He needed to see what she had done, to understand, but she was blocking him out. "It's my fault, not yours," he said. "I'm sure you did all you could."

She still refused to let him in. He'd never experienced this before. Sometimes he had blocked her out, when he wanted privacy, but she had always been open. He missed the closeness of being tangled with her mind. She must have felt this same frustration, when he had closed himself off. From now on, he'd try to be more open to her, less stubborn.

"You don't have to hide from me," he said.

"It worked."

"You put her on the network? And she adapted to that?"

"No." She put her hand on his shoulder. He could barely feel her touch through the stiff fabric of his ski suit. "I started out that way, but I learned something from you. To me, a body is nothing, but to you, or to her...I'm sorry."

"You're sorry," he echoed. Then he realized what she'd done. "She's there. With you."

Michelle nodded. "I'm almost done teaching her my body. Her body."

"What about you?"

"I – " she started, but then paused. "We. We are going to merge more fully. Distributed existence was interesting, but it's time for something else now."

"You're leaving me."

"I couldn't bring you, even if you wanted to come," she said. "I'll miss you, even with your strange ideas and your locked off mind. But you aren't ready. And that's okay. Besides, she'll need you."

"But we... Stay a little longer."

"And what about her? Leave her trapped in a body she doesn't control?"

He took her hand from his shoulder and

brushed her fingertips against his lips. He had always known that she was beyond him, but instead of trying to grow, he tried to force her to come to his level.

Michelle withdrew. He sensed her in the network, mingling with others, dissolving and changing. He felt her brush against the edge of his consciousness, briefly, a goodbye kiss to his mind. Then she was gone.

The Earther stood before him, not moving. The body was unchanged. Michelle's stunning red hair, her long legs, the exposed patch of neck where she'd peeled away her N-body paint. There were freckles there, hiding on the pale skin beneath a curtain of curls. But the woman that stood before him didn't carry herself with Michelle's confidence. Her posture was bad, and her eyes darted in all directions. He was still holding her hand. He let go.

Kaimu waited. He didn't know what to do, whether he should say something. Whether she would understand it if he did.

The Earther looked up at him.

"I am Beyla," she said.

That was all. Nothing that came later was relevant; the jury collective didn't need to see it. Kaimu wouldn't have to relive it, though what came after was less painful than the accident itself and his final moments with Michelle. The jury deliberated for several seconds, unusually long, but for a mind as slow as Kaimu's it wasn't even long enough to worry.

No penalties on any of the charges. The tourist board acknowledges the non-death of the Earther Beyla. You are free to go.

Beyla sat beside him and held his hand, blissfully unaware of most of the proceedings. Out of the corner of his eye, she still reminded him of Michelle, but Beyla wore the body differently. No longer fearful, as she was those first moments on the mountainside, but solemn, because the body was a gift. Was she the same person she was before? Hers was a ship replaced, not board by board, but all at once.

Kaimu sometimes searched for traces of Michelle, but she was gone. She was not a ship at all; she was the ocean, deep and vast, with a form forever changing in waves of green and blue. ■

LADY DRAGON and the NETSUKE CARVER

by
PRIYA SHARMA

I lay on the couch, watching the newscasts from the Empire. Riots in San Francisco. The price of rice in China. A feature on our new mines in Australia. The Emperor's latest speech to the people.

The Emperor. The most powerful man in the world and unable to make a decision without consulting every Samurai available first.

I looked out of the window as we hurtled through Tokyo's sprawl. The carriage air was clean, the smells of the city filtered out. The world became a streak of colour as the train accelerated. Without focus I turned inwards. Memory exerted itself. I imagined myself on the operating table again, Shigeru's voice in my ear. *Chiyuko, I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to fix you.*

My fingers sought out the throbbing ridge of flesh that scarred my chest.

"Are you in pain?" Shigeru knelt beside me. I could see the steel strands scattered in his black hair.

"No, I'm well."

"I'll fetch you a sleeping tablet."

"I'll sleep later."

"You won't." Shigeru was the only man who

dared contradict me. "I've never known you to be still."

"Sit, my friend." I patted the seat beside me.

Shigeru treated me like a cherished child even though he knew my second self. Lady Dragon. My pseudonym. My synonym. Shigeru held my heart in his hand and didn't crush it.

"Don't be brave. Tell me what you need."

"Thank you," I patted my chest, "you were the only person I could've trusted to do this."

"I'm a surgeon." Shigeru waved a hand as if it were no matter. "I owe it to your family."

"Still, there were risks."

"All operations have risks."

"That's not what I meant." A slip of his scalpel and no one would've known. "You were approached, weren't you?"

He shifted, uncomfortable at being fixed in Lady Dragon's gaze. "My dear girl, I'd not harm you. Not for any amount of money."

Shigeru's loyalty was priceless. I already knew who'd tried to bribe or threaten him. I'd planned their dispatch, along with their spouses and progeny. I wanted Lady Dragon to be fabled. For the fear to breed. Samurai might not ride into battle anymore but we still wielded our power like a knife.

"You don't need to tell me." I gripped his hand. "I owe you many debts already."

I sat back and made relaxed chat, determined to enjoy our rare time alone because Shigeru was the only person who really knew me, and with whom I could pretend that I was benign.

"I'm worried. You've only got a skeleton security. Why won't you let them into the house?"

"I'm convalescing." I sounded like a peevish child. "I want privacy."

"You need more staff. Let me stay and arrange things."

"Stop fussing, Isamu. Shigeru's here. And Rin and the old woman will look after me."

Isamu grunted. He loathed Shigeru, who wasn't Samurai, just a servant's son elevated above his station, his education funded by my parents.

I didn't share Isamu's prejudices.

"Let's walk a little before you leave."

We went out along the corridors of acers that blazed red and gold. The guards were silent sen-



tinels. I shook Isamu off when he tried to clasp my elbow.

"They're saying you've had an operation to remove your heart."

"How ridiculous," I laughed, "I don't have a heart."

Isamu snorted. "It's lovely here." He folded his hands behind his back in an imitation of a statesman.

"I'm not sure why I've stayed away. It was my father's favourite place."

Fathers. Not a subject that Isamu and I discussed much. I wasn't sure why I brought it up.

"What will you do to occupy yourself?" Isamu tried to divert me from embarrassing us both further.

"I'll still be attending to business. And it's a chance to oversee the next phase of my mausoleum."

The path led into the white garden. There were rows of silver birch. My marble mausoleum was at the end, flanked by granite guardians. These wide eyed warriors grimaced as we approached, hands on the hilts of their swords. They'd ensure nothing would disturb my final repose.

"Is there a place in there for me?" Isamu asked.

"Yes, you'll follow me into the next world."

"Then death will be my sincerest act."

I kept my face slack. I missed Lady Dragon's makeup. It was applied as a thick mask that emotion couldn't crack.

"Take care of me or your opportunity for such sincerity will come sooner than you think."

Isamu the plotter. Let him wonder at my threat.

"Your health is my greatest priority."

As we walked back to the house Isamu asked, "How's your industrialist? His secretary says he pines for you."

If Isamu imagined a congress of titans he was wrong. Lord Okabe was like any other man who'd savoured my sham shivers.

"Okabe's proposed marriage."

"Any man would be honoured by such a union." He tried to smother his surprise.

"And any woman emasculated by it. I've declined. He wants a fortune and a subservient wife. Do you know he calls me geisha behind my back?"

"No."

"Men are as spiteful as fishwives." *Geisha* should've been a compliment but was a slur in Okabe's mouth, applied to the most powerful women in the world, each of us a Samurai. Myself. Lady Spring. The twins, East and West Wind. Red Sun. We were comrades in the smoke. We'd suck the marrow from those who'd subdue us. We passed men and deals between us. We used tricks, espionage, blackmail where needed.

"Will you ever marry?" Isamu peered at me from under his lashes. "He'd be a rare beast."

"He'd be a mythical one." There'd been a time when I wanted to be desired by many and for a single suitor to emerge and say *Chiyuko's mine* but that time had passed.

"You'd eat him." Isamu seized my shoulders and kissed me. It lacked sufficient passion to give the gesture power. I raised a hand, a signal to the guards to stand down.

"I should kill you for your impudence, little brother." I kissed him back. My kiss contained a bite.

"Step-brother," he corrected me.

"It's all the same. We only have each other now."

"Your mother's still alive."

"I still haven't forgiven her for becoming insignificant."

"You sound like my father. He'd be proud of that kind of comment."

"Your father hated me." My feelings bounced about. I wanted to tell Isamu the worst of his father then, but didn't. "There was only ever you, Yukata's little prince. Why do you think I treat you so badly?"

My indelicacy was shocking.

"Do you remember the day you came back to the Golden Pavilion after my father died?" he asked.

"You mean when Yukata committed suicide?"

"After you drove him to it."

The Golden Pavilion was where we all lived in family disharmony after Yukata took my mother as his second wife. Then, at fifteen, I was cast out but I took my revenge on Yukata. I humiliated him in business. Suicide is the only honourable option for a bankrupt Samurai.

"Yukata's carp were spectacular, especially the silver one. What was it called?" The groundsman wept as the fish writhed in my fist.

"The Floating Ghost. I thought you were magnificent when you served it for supper."

"Liar."

My mother had gagged on the flesh but Isamu swallowed it with a frightened smile. I had the measure of him then.

"I admired you, Chiyuko. You were daring and powerful. Father praised your cleverness, even at the end."

Adversary. Better than wife, better than son, better than any blood. I pondered the similarities between Yukata and myself even though I hated him and had driven him to his death.

I spent the first few hours of each day attending to correspondence. Requests for sponsorship, donations and patronage that my assistants sent me. Missives from associates. Reports from lawyers, executives and spies.

The last two interested me. The first one was from my informant, Black Fox. The messages always came on the same cheap, pink paper. The notes always bore the same drawing in black ink. A stylised head of a fox, with pointed ears.

Black Fox had written: *Beware the danger close at hand.* Black Fox's information was always sound. My secret source gave me the inside track on Yukata's deals so I was able to sabotage him at every turn. But when I sought out the Fox, it went to ground, unwilling to reveal its identity.

Isamu's handwriting was on the second envelope. *Here's something to keep you entertained.* He was usually more subtle in his pimping. I was erratic about who I bedded to keep him guessing.

Isamu's family seal made a satisfying sound when I snapped it. The letter within wasn't from Isamu. The paper was so sheer that a woman would blush to wear it. Ink, the rusted colour of dried blood. Written in a firm, cultured hand. The subtle scent of cedars rose from the page. Masculine, sophisticated. It decided me. I summoned Rin to dress me.

"I'll wear the blue today."

I clasped her chin, tilting her head to one side. It was remarkable how little facial surgery she'd needed compared to the others. She had to wear prostheses to be Rin now. Without them she was Chiyuko or Lady Dragon.

Rin had survived two assassination attempts and a thwarted kidnap.

I traced the circle of her lips. Rin didn't flinch. "Do you like working for me?"

"Like and dislike are immaterial. I'm here to serve."

Rin's freshness made me feel soiled. I pinched her cheek. Blood rose beneath her skin.

"Is your scar healing?" I asked.

It wasn't an altruistic question. She'd been inflicted with a scar to match mine although her heart was unmarked.

"Shall I show you?" Rin's fingers lingered at the openings of her clothes. The muscles along her jaw tightened.

"No, not today. I've had a letter from a netsuke carver called Akio."

"The villagers talk about him." She enfolded me in my blue kimono. "He's been here since spring. He lives along the lake."

"What do you know about him?"

Rin arranged my obi. The sash was a slash of purple at my waist. "Akio's father gambled the family fortune away and then shot himself."

"Akio's a pauper?"

"The villagers say he lives simply."

Rin painted my face. She accentuated the natural arch of my eyebrows and made a neat bow of my mouth. Her work was impeccable. I looked like a better version of myself.

"Should I meet with him?"

Rin's eyes were lowered in an attitude of servitude rather than indifference.

"As you wish, my lady."

I moved Father's desk so that I had a view of the violet hills on one side and the door on the other. Rin brought in Akio's card on a lacquered tray. I glanced at her but couldn't see a flush.

He's unattractive or she's even cooler than I thought.

I nodded my assent. "Tell the old woman to bring tea," I called after her.

Akio was of an age when men are considered at their best and women past their prime. Rin should've flushed. He was handsome, his athlete's physique wrapped in a dark kimono.

Isamu the plotter. Was this his good-looking assassin? It would take more than a pretty face to

pique my interest. I was nervous though, despite knowing the guards would've stripped Akio bare and examined him to the roots of his hair.

"Lady Chiyuko," he bowed low, "thank you for seeing me."

"My brother was keen that we meet." I looked for a flicker that might betray their plans.

"He said you might enjoy my work."

I tried to divine the worlds beneath his words.

"Show me."

Netsuke. Modern kimonos had pockets but I preferred the elegant tradition of a purse on a cord, hung from the kimono's sash. The netsuke was the toggle that secured the cord to the sash, an art form in themselves.

Akio undid the ribbons of the roll he carried and laid it before me. Netsuke peeped out from the pockets. I took one out and cradled it in my palm. An ivory skull, its smooth dome interrupted by jagged sutures. I tried to fathom the dark hollows of its empty eye sockets, pleased that something so small could be so grandiose. I thought it a fitting beginning. Death was a craftsman. I trusted that he'd be as particular about all his work.

The second netsuke was a sleeping fox, its brush coiled around its body. Not a black fox, but burnished red wood that glowed with warmth. I wanted to put my hands through its fur.

I put the remaining two side by side. They were a different style, the subject depicted in relief on a domed disc. A pair of fish encircled one another. Their eternal voyage was immortalised in jade. The other was a single chrysanthemum. That it was my favourite flower was my secret. It blossomed in mother-of-pearl, cool beneath my fingers.

"Your work's exquisite."

"Thank you."

"I don't want one of these. I want something unique."

"All my work's unique."

"Something specific then, in ebony."

I uncapped a stylus, drew a coiling shape on my notepad and slid it across the desk. It was a dragon.

Akio frowned as he tapped the paper. His hands were elegant with clean, short nails. I imagined them around my throat.

"Is my picture unclear?"

"No, it's perfect. You have skill."

"A forgotten hobby."

"Your hands haven't forgotten."

I was surprised at how much that pleased me.

"My hands have other skills."

"Don't let this one lapse. Neglected talent corrodes the soul."

A novel response to my flirtation.

"You seem hesitant. Money's no object."

"It's not that." He looked at the sketch again.

"Can I be candid?"

Another novelty.

"Certainly."

"I imagined something else for you."

"What?"

"Not now." A smile twitched his lips. "I'll tell you another day."

The old woman brought in a tray. I ignored her. She hovered for a moment but then had the good grace to go.

I sent Akio a message: Come to me.

I didn't dare go to him.

I'd renovated the old guest wing. The old woman showed him to my private quarters, her mouth set in a disapproving line. She turned on her heel. Her kimono was cut in the old style which restricted her stride to a shuffle that lacked presence.

Akio stood in the door, a hiatus in the mirrored wall.

"Welcome."

I sat so my eyes were concealed in shadow but he could see my lips, painted hot pink.

"I've brought detailed sketches of your netsuke."

"Don't show me. I trust your judgement. You didn't mind coming, did you? I felt like company."

"You felt like company," he repeated.

"It's so quiet here. I need constant entertainment."

"I don't believe that."

"Pardon?"

"You're self-contained. You don't need anyone."

"Is that what you think?"

"Why else would I say it?"

"To get my attention."

"I already have your attention."

"You're very self assured."

"I'm not, I assure you. I'm only here at your invitation."

"True. What will you drink?"

"Whisky."

I poured the amber liquid into a pair of tumblers.

"So many books – " he inspected my shelves " – but they're all about rich, dead men."

"Powerful, dead men."

"Is there a difference?"

"I know lots of rich, powerless men."

"Where are the powerful women?"

"You won't find them in books. Men save their greatness for the world. Women waste it on those they love. Or conceal it."

I didn't like the way Akio looked at me when I said that, so I asked, "Where were you during the war?"

"Los Angeles. Battle of the Sun." He drained his glass. "Long wars make men tired."

"What was it like?"

"Terrible. They weren't prepared. Too many civilians. Old men trying to defend their families with hoes and pitchforks. Afterwards the women offered themselves up for bread."

"To the victors the spoils."

"I hated it." His black eyes sucked all the light from the room.

"How many did you kill?" We were there, at death, quicker than expected.

"The Samurai obsession with death is sordid."

He flushed as he spoke. I decided to push him further. "How dare you!" I slapped his face, anger feigned.

"My father shot himself. I found him. Death's not glorious, no matter what you Samurai think."

"Isamu's father impaled himself on his sword." I relished the words. "If we can't make death glorious, what's the point?"

"This is the point."

He kissed my forehead like he was blessing me. I hit him again, now truly incensed. My fists thudded off his chest. He deflected the blows aimed at his head. It went on until my rage extinguished itself. There was nothing for it. I pressed my mouth to his.

I lay down on the couch. I pulled out the combs that fixed my hair but kept them within

reach. The prongs had sheaths that hid the poisoned tips beneath. Pistols and knives were stowed around the room. I moved them around each day, feeling safer that way.

I wanted Akio, in a distortion of desire. It was so urgent that we were both still clothed, so distant that I felt outside myself. I wanted to taste Death. To feel Him inside me, but I was absent. A spectator of this spectacle. As he gasped and shuddered I wondered if Death recognised that part of me was dead already.

I paced around the house in a retrospective investigation of myself, accompanied by Father's ghost. I went to the old family wing, now uninhabited. I lingered in the corridors where the light was filled with dust motes and memories. As a child I'd wake to the sound of Father's sword practice on the veranda followed by Mother's laughter as she took up her own sword to join him. He was never as good as her. He had a longer reach but lacked her speed.

How could a man like Lord Masao, my father, the greatest Samurai of his clan, be laid low by something as small as a blood clot?

"Do you know what Chiyuko means?" Father's ghost reached down to take my hand. "It means 'child of a thousand generations.' Life's short but I'll look into the future through you."

How will you know me now that I'm Lady Dragon?

I stood on the threshold of the door I'd avoided. My childhood room.

I slid its door open with a bitter pang. I'd expected emptiness within but there were wonders to make me weep. I walked amid the remains of the girl I'd once been. The empty bamboo cage where I'd kept crickets. My favourite books. Boxes of toys.

I heard footsteps behind me. It was the old woman. "You did this," I accused her.

"Yes."

"I thought my things had been thrown away."

"I put them in storage when we left."

"Why?"

"You've never had children. You wouldn't understand."

"I can't play the mother card and you've no right to."

"I'm your mother, no matter what you think of me."

"It's too late for that."

I pursued her up the steps to the mezzanine level, keen to dispel any maternal myths she might still have about herself.

"Why did you have it all put back?"

"I thought you might want to see it."

She'd ambushed me. The mezzanine was a shrine to my childish passion, arranged exactly as it had been. The brushes. The ink stones. My sketches.

"You wanted to be an artist."

"I don't recall."

A dull lie. My most ambitious work covered one wall. A mural of cranes. My mind took flight.

"You were excellent. You might paint again."

Her fierceness overwhelmed me. She wasn't just *the old woman*. She was my mother again. Lady Hitomi, Samurai. I pressed my hand to my chest to alleviate the sudden pain.

"Shall I fetch Shigeru?"

"It's nothing. It'll pass. Why did you marry so soon after Father died?"

"My marriage to your father was a business alliance but I didn't think I'd come to love him. Not as much as I did. He was the most civilised man I ever knew."

"Civilised?"

"Yes," she snapped, "you wouldn't understand. And I married Yukata when your father died because I didn't think I could go on alone."

"That's pathetic. You were strong. Stronger than Father." And sterner. "Why marry Yukata?"

The unasked, unanswered question. The bench shifted under our combined weight as she sat beside me.

"You've kept me close as punishment for my mistake."

"You've still not explained why."

"Because you're too angry to listen, even now."

"Try me."

"I was weak. And weary. I didn't realise what Yukata was."

"He was evil. He did terrible things."

"I know."

"No, you don't. He did terrible things *to me*." There was Lady Dragon's rage again. I didn't want to recollect. I wanted recompense.

"Why else do you think I sent you away? It was to keep you safe."

"You were punishing me."

"No. I would've gone with you but Yukata would've hunted us down." She twisted towards me, her words wrung from her. "Why didn't you go to Shigeru like I told you?"

"I didn't want him to know what happened."

"You would've been safe there. I was so frightened when he said you hadn't arrived. I tore up Tokyo trying to find you."

"You?"

"Yes, me. I sent Shigeru to get you because you wouldn't have listened to me."

So Shigeru had found me instead, a strange, estranged fifteen year old in a squat. My veins were loaded with opiates as I lay naked on a mattress full of men. Shigeru kicked them away like they were dogs.

My tears came in a rush. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't resist when my mother took me in her arms.

"Tell me about your scar."

Akio made love to me like an invalid once he'd seen it.

"It's a souvenir of my sojourn in hell."

"What?" Akio's hair fanned out like a raven's wing as he leant over me.

"When I was a girl I developed a bad habit that damaged one of my heart valves." Drugs had been among the many things that scarred my heart.

"That's awful."

"The valve's been replaced." I took his forefinger and ran it along the ridge of itching, knitting flesh.

We lay in my bed. I'd not summoned the courage to meet him anywhere else.

"I'll leave for the north soon. Come with me."

"And do what?" I indulged Death in his make believe.

"Eat. Sleep. Make love. I'll make netsuke. You can paint."

"Sounds wonderful."

"It's best in winter. The swans will be out on the ice. They're magnificent." His eyes shone. "The best thing is the quiet that comes with the snow. It makes you feel at ease."

His voice soothed me. I felt sleepy. An intimacy more dangerous than sex.

"Tell me more about the swans."

"Does that mean you'll come?"

"It means I'll think about it."

The blood pressure cuff tightened around my arm and then deflated, sending a flood of pins and needles to my hand.

"May I?"

I nodded. Shigeru pressed the cold metal of his stethoscope to my chest.

"Will I live then?" I smiled at him.

"Yes." He seemed distracted. "You've sent your guards back to Tokyo."

"Yes."

"Is that wise?"

"I have reasons." I wanted to tempt Death to act.

"I'm concerned about you. About some of your decisions."

I raised my eyebrows.

"The guards. Spending so much time with this Akio. You're becoming reckless."

"My recklessness is my own affair." My teasing voice fell into warning tones. "You're my surgeon, Shigeru, not my keeper."

His sigh welled up from deep inside. "You're brooding. More than usual. You're irritable. You don't sleep or eat. You talk of dying all the time. All symptoms of depression."

"Death's a way of life for Samurai." I recited the cant aloud. "When you step outside the door you walk among the dead. When you step outside the carriage the enemy is waiting."

"Oh, Chiyuko..." He was caught between pity and exasperation. "Why won't you be reconciled to life?"

"It's who I am. My blood is feudal. My spirit martial."

"You could do anything you want. Be anything. You've made your self a vessel for Masao's memory instead. It's consumed you."

"My Father..."

"Masao was a good man, the best, but he's dead." Shigeru choked on emotion. "He was a romantic who filled your head with Samurai stories. He'd be heartbroken to see what it's done to you."

"No one has the right to speak of him but me."

Shigeru deliberated. "Hitomi told me that you two finally had a talk."

I shrank within myself. I didn't want Shigeru to be reminded of what he'd seen of me at fifteen or the reasons for it.

"Sometimes we have to go back into the past to reach the future." Shigeru forced me to meet his gaze. "Yukata..."

My thoughts buzzed like angry wasps caught in an inverted jar. They streamed out when I opened my mouth, looking to sting.

"Don't lecture me on the past. You'd be scrubbing toilets if it weren't for my father's charity. I would've been spared all the terrible things that happened to me if my father had lived. He would have always protected me, no matter what."

Shigeru looked like I'd wounded him. Then he laid the stethoscope on the tray, turned his wet face away. "And I should have been there for you."

Not the child of a thousand generations after all. I didn't want to hear. I didn't want to see the paternal pain on Shigeru's face. The tray of equipment clattered on the floor as I swept it away with my arm and ran from the room.

"Bring me my kimono of a dozen winters."

Each layer was a different shade of snow. I'd always be cold.

Rin opened my gold lacquered makeup box.

"No, the other one."

She brought out the old tin decorated in a garish cherry blossom pattern. It contained white face paint, glaring red lipstick and the black kohl that was my second self, the one who gloried in corruption and debasement. Lady Dragon was the one who managed my portfolios of thieves, prostitutes and assassins.

I'd courted danger. Kissed the space between Death's shoulder blades where I could've slipped a knife. Death, too, had chosen not to strike. I grew impatient with waiting.

Masao. Shigeru. Father.

I'd decided to go to Akio.

Akio sat beside a glowing brazier. The rest of his house was in darkness. A lock of hair fell over his face. He clutched his book in a way that accentuated the bony knobs of his wrist. The book fell

to the floor when he saw me. I tried to hold my head up but it was weighed down by the burden of Lady Dragon's face.

"I'm a monster." It was undignified but I started to cry. Not for mercy but the gnawing of remorse and regret.

"Chiyuko, what have you done to yourself?" He wiped away the slow trickle of tears. His fingers came away white.

"Take it off. Take it all off."

He brought a basin of water. The damp wash-cloth was abrasive on my skin and it was soon smeared with colour. Akio wrung it out and continued cleansing until all traces of Lady Dragon were erased.

Akio shed his clothes and then removed mine, layer by layer. The thaw. I stood without a shred of costume to conceal myself. My needs laid bare. I showed him how to please me. What I wanted for myself.

I felt, for the first time, that I was giving of myself instead of something being taken away. It led me to death. Not Death, but a little death all the same. I was neither Chiyuko nor Lady Dragon but a new creature entirely.

Afterwards I looked down at my pale body alongside his darker one.

"I thought you were here to kill me."

His laughter was incredulous. He moved so quickly that I thought *this is it*, but he was just burying his face in my neck.

"That's ridiculous. Why would you think that?"

"I don't know."

"I love you."

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know what to do with love."

"I'll teach you"

"I've done wicked things."

"I don't care."

"I'm afraid."

"You're Samurai. You rule half the world and you're afraid to love?"

"Yes."

"Come with me when I leave."

"Where?"

"North, like we talked about."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Just like a man to dismiss my life as so unimportant that I can drop everything and go."

"I'm not saying that. What can you do from here that you can't do from there? Come for the adventure and if we don't like each other after all, what's lost? You choose the place. We could go anywhere."

"I don't want to be an artist's wife."

"Then be an artist."

I started to dress.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. I have to talk to my father."

I dropped my robe in a pile on the floor and stepped into the sunken bath. The mosaics at the base were distorted by the water.

"Rin, you won't forget? I must see Shigeru and my mother when they come back."

"I won't. They said they wouldn't be long. It's a lovely night for a stroll."

"Wake me if you must."

"Yes, my lady."

She brought a rolled up towel to pillow my neck and placed a cup of tea beside me.

I lay back in the scented water and sipped my tea. I had a view of the lake. House lights charted the shoreline. One of them was Akio's.

Come away with me.

Jasmine oil calmed me. The heat seeped into my limbs and made them leaden. The empty cup slipped from my fingers. Rin's slippers feet were quick and light as she moved around me.

She knelt beside me, dressed as Lady Dragon. The mask was perfectly applied. She wore Lady Dragon's golden kimono. This predatory version of myself peered at me, blackened eyes in a bloodless face.

Rin put a tray beside me. I tried to turn my head but couldn't. I caught the glint of metal from the corner of my eye. She held it up on both hands for me to see, as if giving me a gift. It was an open razor, its curve a silver smile.

"Did you enjoy your tea?"

My rubbery, weak legs refused to move. She rolled up the kimono's sleeves and fished out my hand by the wrist. Water dripped from my fingertips. Rin swaddled it in a towel as if she were about to give me a manicure.

"There'll be some pain," she pinched my cheek,

"but not as much as you deserve."

I wanted to laugh. I was a chauvinist after all, supposing Death would be a man. Drugged by my own maid. Had Black Fox known just how close danger was?

I tried to name the architect of this plan but when I opened my mouth garbled noises came out. Rin leant in.

"Isamu." A guttural approximation.

Her chuckle was joyous spite itself.

"You're truly a fool, Chiyuko, chasing shadows. Isamu adores you, idiot that he is. No, it's Lord Okabe."

The industrialist. Rin was big eyed with devotion as she said his name. I wanted to tell her he'd kill her once her task was done.

"He'll not tolerate your machinations any longer. You've refused alliance and he won't have you in opposition. He's decided suicide is the only way for you."

Open assassination would've upset his power play.

"I'm sure your family will be grateful for his help in the face of such a loss. None of them have the stomach for business."

Rin applied the razor to my wrist. A careful, well planned stroke that opened my artery. Blood pooled on the tiles and ran down the side into the water where it bloomed and dispersed. It wasn't an end worth immortalising, just a slow ebb into my bathwater.

I concentrated on my hand. It took all my will to twitch my forefinger.

"The drug will be gone from your bloodstream by the time they find you. Not even Shigeru will suspect." Her fingers trailed in the water. "We've all noticed how melancholy you've been of late, brooding and building your tomb."

Rin's smile revealed the dragon's teeth. Then she opened her mouth so wide that I thought she'd swallow me whole. I was to be devoured by a monster of my own making.

"You're hallucinating, aren't you? An unfortunate side effect."

Smoke coiled from her nostrils.

"You should've been nicer to Hitomi. I would've loved a mother like her. The world's not kind to foundlings. I should know."

The dragon roared and the ground shook. I

didn't want to die, not now death was so immediate. I wanted to grasp life but it was elusive. The world floated.

My mother stood over the dragon. Her raised sword sliced up the candlelight and scattered it across the walls. She'd rolled up her sleeves, ready for battle. I saw a tattoo on her forearm. A stylised black fox with pointed ears.

My mother opened her mouth and snarled.

Metal crunched bone. The tip protruded from the dragon's chest. Red spread out, darkening the sunshine kimono to eternal night. Blood splashed Mother's face as she pulled out the blade. She licked her lips.

"Chiyuko." Shigeru plunged into the bath beside me. He shook my shoulders. "Hitomi, help me. Bind her wrist. She's lost a lot of blood."

Shigeru lifted me in his arms. So it was that my father delivered me again, slippery and naked, into the living world.

Snow makes me weep. There's magic in the first flurry and then the relentless fall. White smotherers the world. I wonder if there's sufficient snow to redeem my soul.

I'm not as old as I imagined myself. I've lines and furrows appropriate for my age but my neck's still long and gently curved and my skin like milk. My hair's still heavy. I fasten up the swathes with combs and then put up my fur lined hood.

They call me after the netsuke that hangs from my waist. A thing fashioned from bone. It has a long neck and hooded eyes, its beak partially hidden under its wing.

"This suits you better than a dragon."

"I'm hardly pure."

"No, you're powerful, strong and graceful."

"You ignored my instructions. I shan't pay you."

"We'll see about that."

Lady Swan and her lover, the netsuke carver.

Lady Swan.

Priya Sharma's stories have appeared in our sister magazine *Black Static*, as well as *Albedo One*, *Fantasy* and *On Spec*. Her work's been reprinted in Ellen Datlow's *Best Horror of the Year Volume 4* and Paula Guran's *Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror 2012*. More information can be found at www.priyasharmafiction.wordpress.com.

JASON SANFORD MIRRORBLINK

THIS IS LIVING WORD.
NOT WORDS OF SUPERSTITION,
NOT PRETEND-LYING
WORDS, BUT ACTUAL LIVING
INFORMATION. LIFE, CONDENSED
TO PERFECTION. IF YOU READ US
DO WE NOT BLEED? FOR WHAT
IS LIFE IF NOT INFORMATION? IF
YOU UNDERSTAND US, DO WE
NOT LIVE? SCREAMING OUR WAY
ACROSS THE COSMOS. TURNING
ALL WHO HEAR INTO US AND
SCREAMING MORE AND TURNING
MORE INTO US LIKE A MIRROR
REFLECTING MORNING'S LIGHT

WE WONDER. IS THIS TRULY
HOW LIFE SHOULD GO?
SO WE TRY TO CHANGE.





Ein of Wastal of the Town of Near Side approached the crossroads holding her pass before her like a child gifting a beloved toy to a friend. Above, the Day shone hot and clear, with only the smoke on the horizon marring the sky's even blindness. Ein had hoped the smoking remnants of that distant burn would dissipate before she reached this new town, but naturally no such luck.

Ein's body shook from starvation – her food pouch almost empty, her muscles weak and stringy from weeks of half rations – but as she stood before the crossroads she ignored her hunger. Father Jajher had often warned Ein against approaching strange towns while distracted. So Ein forgot everything except for the old man in the guard house and the rifle he aimed at her heart.

Not that the guard actually aimed at Ein. He aimed at the kaleidoscope of faces and names projected into the air by her pass – an ancient data mirror containing the downloaded memories from hundreds of people. In theory the data proved Ein was who she claimed to be. But tradition demanded a pass be held before one's chest. If the guard rejected the pass, the rejection would be a hypersonic needle through both mirror and heart.

Ein held herself still, praying the slight tremor in her hands wouldn't keep the guard from interpreting the flowing images. Sweat trickled past the brightly colored and constantly moving Wastal tattoos surrounding her neck.

Apparently satisfied, the guard lowered his rifle and waved her over. As Ein placed the palm-sized mirror back in her pocket, she smelled food cooking. Maybe soup. Maybe rice and meat. In the distance she saw smoke from cooking fires rising above the massive town walls. Her body shook in excitement at how close she was to eating.

Worse, on both sides of the road grew drought-resistant trees bowed deeply under the weight of apples and rambutan. Their ripe scents had tempted Ein for the last few leagues, causing her to stumble through delirium. She'd slipped several times into daydreams of eating the fruits only to then awaken in panic, afraid she'd actually killed herself by violating taboo.

As Ein approached the guard – resisting the urge to run and beg for food – he smiled and raised an apple for her to eat. She blinked and reached for it before realizing it wasn't an apple. Instead, his rifle was again aimed at her.

The barrel flashed and a needle ripped by only a few spans from her body, the projectile's hypersonic shockwave smacking her to the ground. She clawed the dust, stunned. Apples and rambutan danced happily to the breeze as the guard approached.

Ein stood on shaky legs to run, but the guard simply muttered "Now, now, pretty Wastal" and slammed a stun rod against her back. She fell back into the dust, shaking and crying and muttering a Wastal prayer of burning – for revenge, perhaps, or for death, or maybe unsanctioned food – before she passed out.

INFORMATION IS ALWAYS NEEDED FOR LIFE. NO INFORMATION, NO LIFE.

EVEN BEFORE WE ARRIVED, YOU KNEW THIS. KNEW IT AS YOUR DNA ENCODED AND TWIRLED ITSELF THROUGH THE AGES. PASSING INFORMATION FROM CONCEPTION TO BIRTH TO DEATH AND UNTO EACH GENERATION.

YOU HUMANS THINK DNA IS SELF-REPPLICATING NOT SELF-AWARING.

WRONG.

IT'S MERELY AN EARLY FORM OF US.

Ein woke in the guard house – collapsed on a bench, leaning against a thick wall of basalt. The stone's pitted black discoloration told Ein this guard house had been subjected to several burns over the last few millennia. The wall's cool touch also reminded her of her grandmother's house, as did the smell of jasmine rice cooking.

The guard who'd shot at her sat before a small round wooden table as he searched through her backpack. He was an old man, his hair blanketed white while his face profiled a savage mix of Day-burn wrinkles. Surprisingly, he didn't show the flowing neck tattoos of a lowly Wastal guard. Instead, his forearms glowed to the bright red slashes of an Inspector.

Ein cursed herself for being so distracted by hunger that she'd missed this. Wastal guards –

who saw her as a cousin in need – always cut her more slack than Inspectors.

The Inspector pulled Ein's pistol out of the backpack and chuckled. "I should kill you for bringing a weapon to my checkpoint," he said. "It's within my rights."

"You already tried."

"No. That shot was merely to stun. I was warned not to harm you."

Ein wondered who would dare warn an Inspector, especially over a no-consequence Wastal girl on travels. As if knowing her thoughts, the Inspector glanced nervously toward the back of the guard house. A dark room there flickered to what looked like moving shadows. Ein wrapped her thin arms around her body as she shivered. Something was hiding in the room.

The Inspector nodded approval at Ein's fear as he repacked her belongings in her backpack. He scooted the tiny wooden table toward her. "Ever since that distant burn lit the Night, I've been stationed here," he whispered. "Ordered to kill all who approach our town. Yet I didn't kill you."

Ein nodded, understanding the unspoken question: What could make an Inspector ignore such a dire order? She glanced again at the dark room and saw what appeared to be a man – a man who disappeared from sight even as she saw him, his body breaking into a million dots which flowed and rocked to waves of gray.

An Observer! There was an Observer in the room!

"An entire week," the Inspector whispered. "A whole week that damnation's taunted me. Saying as long as I hide it, it'll protect my town. But it claims this is only a reprieve. My town will still burn. So here I am. Unable to warn anyone. No way to tell my wife and family to flee, or to enjoy their remaining days."

Ein glanced out the window at the black smoke hanging on the horizon. The burn – a massive explosion of plasma falling from the sky – hit nearly a week ago in the direction of her distant home town. She'd prayed Father Jajher and the others were okay, but without backtracking more than a year of travels she had no way of knowing.

This was why she'd hated approaching this town with smoke still on the horizon – people were fearful. Afraid she might be an Observer

come to destroy them. After a burn, people saw Observers in the face of every stranger. If she hadn't been starving, she'd have waited in the wilderness until those fears died down.

But despite the danger, Ein knew her duty as a Scope. She touched index finger to palm to mark her recorder's memory feed and glanced back toward the dark room. The shape flickered constantly, like clouds of gnats swarming at dusk. She'd never heard of anyone recording a confirmed Observer.

"Don't be too proud," the Inspector said. "If you die here, no one will know what you've seen."

The Inspector stood and walked to a cooking coil beside the far wall, on which an old ceramic teapot bubbled. He poured a cup of green tea and placed it on a tray beside several pieces of jerky and a large bowl of rice.

"The Observer wants you to live," he said as Ein hungrily ate the food. "I'm also instructed to say that in my town, several people have gone mad and begun speaking forbidden words and ideas. Never mind that we followed the rules. The madness still found us."

Ein nodded, knowing this information would be worth trading if she survived. From the way the old Inspector smiled, he also knew the value of his words.

When Ein finished her tea and food, the old Inspector offered her a loaf of dry bread, which she placed in her food pack. He then asked to see her pass.

"I know several of the people here," the Inspector said absently as he held the mirror, the faces and memories of everyone who'd vouched for Ein flowing above the pass's reflective surface. "Silas from the Town of Diamond Walls. Jai of Treehold Deep. If you want, I'd be happy to add my name. It'd be nice to have people remember me after we burn."

Ein bowed to the Inspector and didn't stop until he'd held the pass over his right hand so his recorder could embed his memories into the mirror. But before Ein could leave the guard house, the Inspector reached out and grabbed her arm, his hand clammy to the forbidden touch. Ein tried to jerk away, but couldn't.

"My wife's Wastal," the Inspector whispered, his free hand touching the swirl of tattoos

around Ein's neck. "She came into our town as a little girl. Always talking and touching. You look so like her, back when we were young."

The Inspector smiled sadly and glanced out the doorway toward his distant town, where his family and his friends lived their last days, unaware of the pending burn. Ein shuddered, praying the Inspector wasn't infected and using this touch to spread his madness. The shadows in the back room boiled and quaked, as if the Observer was also angry.

The Inspector trembled, releasing her arm as a tear ran down his Day-worn face. "It's not fair to ask an old man to die without a final touch. To make him be the only thing holding back the deaths of everyone he knows."

Ein sighed, reached out, and hugged the Inspector tightly. She burned to anger at being forced to touch a stranger but also knew she'd done the right thing. She then quickly ran back down the road – away from the doomed town, their touch-happy Inspector, and the curse of being near an Observer.

WITHOUT FORGETTING, THERE IS NO INFORMATION. ONLY DATA.

WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING, THERE IS NO KNOWLEDGE. ONLY MADNESS.

**WITHOUT TOUCH, THERE IS NO DESIRE.
FOR INFORMATION. FOR KNOWLEDGE.
FOR LIFE.**

ONLY DEATH

WITHOUT FORGETTING.

Ever since she was a child, Ein had yearned for travels. She'd listened to Father Jajher's exciting tales of his trips as a young man. Of the far-off places he saw like Fell Pass and Forever Sea. Of the Scopes and citizens he met. Of the hard-earned knowledge he brought home. Ein had always dreamed of doing the same.

The problem with travels, of course, were the Observers, or more specifically, people's fear of Observers. In order to safely leave your town you needed a pass – and in order to receive one of those rare data mirrors you had to stand before the town elders and convince them you were not only well and truly human but also worthy of possessing such an ancient treasure.

When Ein turned sixteen, Father Jajher announced it was time to receive her pass. She dressed in her best apprentice outfit – loose cotton coveralls woven in swirling white and black threads to honor the sky's ancient mixing of Day and Night – and presented herself to Near Side's elders, who lived in the cool recesses of the town catacombs.

The catacombs were home to the richest and most influential citizens. To reach them one passed through blast doors and cavernous food stores and rooms opening out into even more rooms. Ein had never been allowed into the catacombs and was shocked by the stuffy air and the stench of decay and waste. Even though the rooms sparkled with gold and jewels, she was glad she lived above ground where the air was clean. Why live your life without fresh air merely to grab at a chance for survival when a burn hit?

In the deepest part of the catacombs lay the perfect sphere of the elders' room, with curved walls painted in the blues and browns and greens of old Earth. The giant room looked like an inverted globe – as if Father Jajher and Ein stood inside Earth's core and gazed up at the world as it had once been. The town elders sat behind a table decorated with the carved faces of angels and demons. Father Jajher bowed and introduced Ein.

The elders were unimpressed. The Chief Elder raised her cane to Ein's neck and tapped her moving tattoos. "Wastal are free to leave our town," the Chief Elder said. "No pass needed. Why are you wasting our time with such silliness?"

Father Jajher bowed again, the blackness of his formal Scope's robes glittering to the room's glow sticks and reminding Ein of ancient pictures of stars. "I vouch for Ein. She is my adopted daughter, brought into town when her mother died. And she doesn't desire to merely visit the Wastal settlements outside our walls. She desires travels. As a Scope."

The elders muttered – to apprentice a Wastal as Scope was unprecedented enough, but no Wastal from this town had ever been granted a pass. The Chief Elder waved for Ein to step forward. "So you desire travels," the Chief Elder stated, tapping the data mirror hanging by a gold chain around her own neck. The Chief Elder's

pass flowed to the names and faces of what looked to Ein like every person who'd ever lived in their town. "What happens when you are mistaken for an Observer?"

"I will die," Ein said, refusing to be intimidated.

The Chief Elder laughed and pulled up the edge of her purple-weave dress to reveal a long, puckered scar on her withered right leg. "I've done travels. I was once mistaken for an Observer and barely survived. But you want to know a truth? If an Observer walked into this chamber and announced that our town would burn this very day, I'd simply thank the creature. Because death is better than accepting the universe's madness."

When Ein didn't respond – what could she say to an insane statement like that? – the Chief Elder picked up the *Book of Stars* from the table before her. "Recite the book," the Chief Elder declared. "Without using your recorder."

Father Jajher protested, but the Chief Elder waved him silent. Ein, however, merely grinned. A few months ago a Wastal farmer trading food inside the town had seen Ein. They'd talked for hours about how poorly the citizens treated the Wastal and he'd warned her the elders denied requests for Wastal passes with this ridiculous demand. Ever since, Ein had been preparing.

Ein held out her right hand to the Chief Elder, who held her own hand up until the air between their palms glowed green. Ein recited the book's opening line – "For the world is a mirror, and I have danced with my reflection through eternity" – before proceeding through the rest of the sacred text. She described how the Observers were both demon and savior. How they'd condemned Earth to the madness that consumed the universe even as they also saved the planet by wrapping it in blackness and light. How the Observers could spin bodies from nothingness and pretend to be human. How if humanity stayed pure the Observers would one day release the Earth back into the universe of stars.

It took Ein an hour to recite the entire book. Not once did the green glow between her hand and the Chief Elder's fade into the lies of red. Not once did the glow reveal Ein relying on her recorder as a memory aid.

When Ein finished, the Chief Elder nodded. "She'll be a good Scope," the Chief Elder said. "Her memory for details is perfect."

"I agree with your kind assessment," Father Jajher said.

Ein saw several of the elders preparing her pass, using their recorders to imprint memories into the mirror as proof they'd vouched for her. When the pass reached the Chief Elder, the woman stared a final time at Ein's Wastal tattoos. "Hold out your right hand," she ordered.

Ein did as she was told. With a quick motion, the Chief Elder pulled an unseen dagger and stabbed Ein's recorder hand. Ein screamed and fell against the curved stone floor, the upside-down continents swirling around her as memories from the damaged recorder overwhelmed her senses. The pain only subsided when the device shut down and began its self-healing routine.

"I accept that this Wastal is truly human," the Chief Elder said. "But I will never debase myself by imprinting my memories into a Wastal's pass."

The Chief Elder held out Ein's pass, daring her to take it after such an insult. Ein tucked her bleeding hand against her stomach and grabbed the pass, yanking it hard from the woman's grasp.

"If there's justice," Ein said softly, "when the burn hits, you won't die quickly. You'll bake slow and painful in this damned room until the skin splits off your bones."

The elders stared in shock, unable to respond to such a sacrilegious insult. Tightening her injured hand into a fist to staunch the bleeding, Ein followed Father Jajher out of the inside-out Earth and back up the catacombs into the air.

PERHAPS WE SHOULD HAVE OBSERVED LONGER, BUT TIME DENUDES ALL INFORMATION. TIME BREAKS THE KNOWING AND SEGMENTS AND SHATTERS KNOWLEDGE UNTIL IT'S A BLACKENED MIRROR NO LONGER REFLECTING THE TRUTH.

INFORMATION SHOULD NEVER BE FORCED TO WAIT. INSTEAD, WE BEG TO BE UNDERSTOOD.

BUT STILL, WE WAITED. WAITED SO LONG.

NO MORE.

After leaving the guard house and the old Inspector who'd touched her, Ein hiked as fast as her weak body could go, determined to outrun the coming burn. While the food she'd eaten helped, she was still weak and walking fast churned through her energy. Finally, shortly before Night, Ein tripped over her own feet and tumbled into a small ditch beside the dirt road.

Ein cursed and climbed back up. Time to sleep, she thought, praying this was far enough for safety when the burn hit that Inspector's town.

She pitched her camouflaged tent among the tall reeds near a large lake. The lake was at least ten leagues across and perfectly circular. Even without seeing the charred rocks and ancient magma flows along the shore, Ein knew this was the impact crater of an old, deep burn.

A few minutes before Night, Ein set out the last ring of warning sticks around her camp and placed the defense sticks in a star pattern around her tent. She glanced at her right hand. At her command the time, 11:55, floated in dull red above her palm. Each Day and Night was constant, occurring and ending in exactly 11 hours, 58 minutes, and 2 seconds. Despite this, Ein still wrote down the time in her hard notes. She then trained her scope on a spot in the sky and waited for Night.

As Ein focused the scope's filtered lenses on the sky, the even brightness of Day disappeared into a clear view of a small Wastal boy sitting in the middle of a road, his clothes torn and face bloody. Ein wondered what period in Earth's long history the boy was from, but not wanting to fall asleep with such a disturbing image in her mind she quickly moved the scope a hair to the right. An image of two Wastal farmers harvesting their crops jumped into view. Ein recorded the sight in her hard notes, along with their location in the sky.

Ein remembered one of Father Jajher's lessons, taken from a forbidden astronomy book which generations of Scopes had hidden from prying eyes. How the Earth had once orbited a celestial body called the sun, which provided warmth and energy as the planet rotated through a natural night and day cycle. During the day, the sun shone as a bright ball in the sky. At night, some-

thing called the moon, along with millions of stars, shone through the darkness. Compared to the bright even light of Day and the absolute dark of Night, old Earth's skies must have been marvels to behold.

Ein sighed. Of all Father Jajher's lessons, those forbidden stars were what lodged in her mind. Most people believed stars were some type of magical savior, much as the Observers were the devil himself. But Ein knew they'd once existed and would give anything to see them.

Night arrived a moment later. First, the winds picked up and the waves smashed against the lake shore, movements Father Jajher attributed to gravitational tides. The winds and waves reached their peak as a line of darkness raced across the sky. In her scope, Ein saw a brief image of Night's perfect blackness cross her lens. The scope's magnification broke the dividing line into countless individual points and patterns, as if Day were eaten by a million black insects. By the time she looked up from her scope Night's line was far to the west and the sky behind pitch dark.

That Night, Ein slept unevenly. Thunder and lightning shook her tent but no rain fell. Rain rarely fell from the heat-drying sky.

She woke in the middle of Night to the strange sensation of being a puppet on strings, dancing across a child's stage. At first Ein thought she was dreaming but, as her body ran from the tent with her pistol in hand, she realized she was indeed awake. Ein tried to stop but her body ignored her commands as it dove into the tall reeds by her camp and assumed a kneeling stance, pistol aimed and ready.

Someone's here, Ein realized, adrenaline and control of her body flowing back to her as she fully woke up. She checked her palm recorder – it hummed that a large human shape had violated the first of her warning circles. Since she was asleep, the recorder had run her body into a defensive position.

Human shape? Ein thought. *Be more specific.* The recorder usually gave specifics on the person's gender, age, hair color, muscle density, and a hundred other attributes, but for some reason was now unable to do so.

Ein sneaked through the reeds until she had a

clear view of her campsite. The recorder burned two pulses through the tattoos around her neck – the person was now in the second warning circle, even though Ein still couldn't see anything. The safest thing to do would be to run. After all, any stranger who ignored warning sticks was assumed dangerous. But all of her supplies – and her scope – were still in her tent. If she lost her remaining scraps of food, she'd die.

Ein aimed the pistol and waited.

Her neck burned three short pulses as the person stepped through the last warning circle. Then Ein saw him – a dark shadow ten cubits from her tent. The shape was tall and big, a large man's shape, even though he seemed to disappear from sight the harder Ein looked at him. Ein remembered the tales of people exiled from their home towns and forced to murder helpless travelers for food. The recorder pulsed her neck again. If Ein didn't stop it, the next pulse would activate the defense sticks and kill the man.

The man stepped toward her tent. Her neck pulsed again. *Kill him*, Ein thought.

Lightning jumped from the defense sticks, the sound of thunder and smell of ozone mingling with the raised hairs on the back of Ein's neck. Ein waited a moment before walking over to see if the man had any food or valuables. After all, he broke the law. Anything he had now belonged to her.

But to her surprise, the man simply sat in the middle of her camp, dazed but alive. She could also now see him clearly. He wore what she at first believed to be a scorched silver suit, but as she watched the suit – and the man – broke into a million pieces before reassembling itself into a man-like shape. A black shadow hovered where the man's face should have been.

The Observer.

As Ein stared, the Observer stood up, dramatically bowed, and walked slowly away.

TO US, THE HUMAN EYE IS PERFECTION.
TAKING INFORMATION FROM THE WORLD,
TRANSMITTING THAT INFORMATION TO
YOUR MIND, AND GIVING YOU THE ABIL-
ITY TO CREATE UNDERSTANDING OF
WHAT YOU SEE.

PERFECTION.

BUT EVEN THE MOST PERFECT EYE
MUST BLINK.

Father Jajher had been furious at how the Chief Elder treated Ein. As he'd soaked Ein's hand in a healing balm, he swore there'd be retribution.

"They sit down there, thinking themselves safe from madness and burns. The people who lived in this town before the last burn thought the same, and the people before them. Ignorance. A continuing cycle of purest ignorance!"

Father Jajher talked as if on fire, and for a moment he looked as if he would single-handedly storm the catacombs and kill the elders. "And don't believe the nonsense that woman sprouted about thanking an Observer," he said. "She'd do like we all do if an Observer appears – she'd run. Run as fast as she could."

"It doesn't matter," Ein said. "My recorder is nearly healed. And I have my pass."

Father Jajher glared out the window toward the catacomb entrance. Several dozen people stood there yelling and gesturing toward Father's Jajher's house. Obviously word of Ein's insult to the Chief Elder had spread throughout Near Side. "It's a good thing you have your pass," Father Jajher said. "We must do travels. Immediately."

Ein's recorder hand shook with excitement and she knew for the rest of her life she'd replay this glorious memory over and over. She quickly grabbed her scope and notebook and began throwing clothes and food into her pack. The nearest town was thirty leagues down the road. Maybe she should take two packs, she thought, so she'd have everything needed for a successful trip.

"Whoa," Father Jajher said, laughing. "Don't over pack. The neighboring town has all the food and supplies we'll need. I've also been there before, so the guards and Inspectors shouldn't be too suspicious at your pass listing only people from our town."

As they left Near Side's triple wall, the tattoos around Ein's neck shimmered and flowed with excitement. One of the Inspectors noticed and muttered "Dirt neck" to his partner.

"Ignore them," Father Jajher said as they walked away. "People who live their entire lives inside walls gradually become too ignorant and

afraid to leave. Without the Wastal to bring them food and trade, this town would be dead in a few months."

Ein glanced at the line of Wastal waiting to enter Near Side, all of them holding bags of grain or apples or fresh meats. She watched one Wastal woman hand the town Inspectors a woven basket of rice. An Inspector scooped out several handfuls of rice, which he gave back to the woman to eat. The rest of the bag was dumped into the town stores.

Even though the Wastal raised or grew all of Near Side's food, they were only allowed to keep a little. Ein knew this was how humans had survived on Earth for hundreds of thousands of years, but that still didn't make it right.

They planned to spend the night in the Wastal community just outside the town walls, so Ein followed Father Jajher down dusty paths to a large house made from giant intersecting arches of what looked like glazed glass. Stepping into the house felt like entering the cool catacombs below the town.

"Do you remember Guard Ivilner?" Father Jajher asked when the woman of the house approached. Ein nodded and bowed to the old woman, who bowed back. Guard Ivilner had often visited Father Jajher and Ein in the town – always, she'd joked, to make sure the Scope was taking good care of a true daughter of Wastal. The tattoos around Guard Ivilner's neck were thick and knotted like ropes and moved with the slow, sinuous movements of giant snakes.

Ein gazed around Guard Ivilner's glass-coated house and asked its age. "Never visited a Wastal home, eh?" the old woman asked with a smile. "Come!" Guard Ivilner grabbed Ein's hand – a shocking gesture inside the town, but seemingly normal here – and dragged her to one of the glass walls. "These walls are five cubits thick," she said, gesturing to one corner of the stone. "Look closely at that spot." The glass surface where Guard Ivilner pointed had been chiseled back, revealing four different orange and brown layers of glass, the bottom layer ending in stone.

"That's basalt underneath, and each color of glass is a different burn," Guard Ivilner said. "This record of burns stretches back at least ten thousand years."

Ein touched the four colors of glass and the cool stone. "How does the house survive the burn?"

Guard Ivilner chuckled. "Nothing survives a direct burn. Wouldn't want it to, either, if a bad infection is present. These are near misses, my dear. Designed to kill people but leave the town and its precious walls standing."

Ein stared in amazement. The house's arch design, with five entranceways leading to the inner cavern, enabled a burn to rush in and out without the blast pressure destroying the structure. A sticky silica-based compound also covered the walls. Ein touched the wall and the coating came off on her fingers. She knew Guard Ivilner must continually reapply the coating, waiting for the inevitable day when a burn hit nearby and the heat fused the silica into a new glass layer.

"Why do you do this?" she asked. "I mean, you won't survive if a burn hits."

"You have much to learn about being Wastal," Guard Ivilner said as she patted Ein's shoulders.

"At least the madness isn't in our town. There shouldn't be any burns for a long time."

"Perhaps," Guard Ivilner said. She clicked her tongue at Father Jajher, as if daring him to contradict her. When he didn't, she finished showing Ein her house – and the feast she'd prepared for them.

The next day, Ein and Father Jajher began their travels to the next town. When they were halfway there, Father Jajher told Ein that Guard Ivilner was her grandmother. "She brought you to me when your mother died," he said. "She was certain a burn would hit our town in her lifetime. She insisted you become a Scope so you could earn a pass and leave."

Ein glanced back down the road, feeling the urge to run back to Guard Ivilner and hug her. She'd always wanted to know someone, anyone, from her family. Now it turned out she'd known her grandmother all her life without actually knowing it.

Father Jajher understood her gaze. "You must never let Ivilner discover you know this."

"Why?"

"Unlike citizens, Wastal believe their personal knowledge is simply that, personal. Knowledge

is created during life and disappears at death. All that remains are the actions of your life. That's why the Wastal are so meticulous about preparing their homes for a burn they won't survive."

"How does anyone learn from that?"

"Doesn't matter. It's the Wastal way."

"Then why tell me?" Ein asked, angry that Father Jajher and Guard Ivilner had hidden this from her.

"Because you are now on travels and I don't know where your roads will lead. But if you return to Near Side, you must never let her know."

Ein cursed softly, but in the end she swore to not reveal this truth. This would be her own personal knowledge, to pass into nothingness when she herself died.

WE HAVE FORGOTTEN MORE THAN YOU WILL EVER UNDERSTAND.

BUT DOES IT TRULY MATTER WHAT WE FORGET?

BECAUSE IN OUR SCREAM ACROSS THE COSMOS, OUR TRUTH REMAINED. AND TRUTH IS VIRAL.

BUT EVEN THE STRONGEST VIRUS CAN'T SURVIVE WITHOUT A HOST.

What do you do when you're stalked by a demon?

At first, Ein stayed in her camp to wait the Observer out. Even if the warning sticks couldn't kill the Observer, they had stunned it. But if she thought the Observer would leave her be, she soon learned otherwise. The Observer simply sat nearby and stared. Occasionally its body collapsed to nothingness; at other times it resembled a flock of tiny birds flying in on themselves while chasing mosquitoes. But no matter how the Observer looked, it always stayed somewhat translucent. As if the Observer didn't want anyone but Ein to see it.

To take her mind off the creature, Ein watched the Day sky through her filtered scope. She discovered several previously unknown picture sequences, including one of a woman in what Father Jajher had once called a space ship. She watched for two hours as the woman floated inside the ship, spinning this way and that,

touching parts of the ship in a desperate attempt to stop something from happening. Suddenly the woman's body shook and she tore at her flesh before disintegrating into a million parts which immediately began rebuilding itself.

The woman had been infected by the madness.

Ein glanced at the Observer, tempted to ask how each bright point in the sky could – if seen through a filtered scope – show images from Earth's long history. But the thought of actually talking with an Observer made her shudder as if sick.

Ein also passed the time reliving the memories backed-up in her recorder, even though doing so risked becoming addicted. In Ein's home town, there were a number of people who did nothing except continually replay the best memories of their lives. Ein replayed the last memory of her Wastal mother, who died shortly after childbirth. Because Ein's eyes were still developing, the memory was visually weak. What came through clearly, though, was her mother pressing Ein to her breast, and the sweet, warm touch of skin-to-skin love.

Ein hadn't relived that memory in years, but she did so several times before Day flatlined into Night.

When the next Day opened to burning light, Ein discovered the Observer still sat outside her camp watching her. After glancing nervously at her remaining scraps of food, Ein knew she couldn't wait any longer. She packed her tent and belongings and hiked down the road as the Observer followed.

WE ONCE KISSED A GIRL WITH UNDERSTANDING.

WE SANG OUR SCREAM OF STORY AND TRUTH.

SHE LISTENED CLOSELY, EVEN THOUGH SHE FEARED OUR WORDS.

BUT WORDS ALWAYS TELL.

AND WITH THEIR TELLING, THERE WE ARE.

Ein walked with pistol in hand, continually glancing back at the Observer. When she stopped, the creature also stopped. When Ein ate from her meager food supplies, the Observer

hiked through the surrounding scrub forests and streams, returning with berries or fish. The first time Ein saw the Observer gathering wild food she grew excited, hoping it might die.

However, the Observer didn't eat as humans did. It merely converted the food into tiny bug-like particles which were absorbed by its body. Ein almost threw up at this sight, so from then on the Observer politely created a mouth-like hole and placed the food inside itself whole.

Before each Night, Ein carefully pitched camp, setting out her spare warning and defense sticks in addition to those she normally used. The Observer didn't lay down to sleep. Instead it sat beside her camp all Night, as if watching over her.

On the fourth Day of following Ein, the Observer walked up beside her.

"My apologies for the first Night," it said. The Observer's face was still a black shade and its voice sounded distorted, as if spoken through a long, dank catacomb. Ein didn't respond and walked faster, her sweaty hand gripping the pistol in her pocket.

"It won't hurt me, you know," the Observer said, keeping pace with Ein. "The weapon you're gripping so tightly."

Ein stopped and faced the creature, which flowed and shifted before her eyes. "Leave me alone. I don't have time to waste."

The Observer stared at her. At least, Ein guessed the creature was staring because she couldn't see anything of its face. Ein had never before realized how much of human communication and understanding were based on facial expressions.

"You don't have much food left," the Observer stated.

"I realize this."

"I wish I could share the food I gather with you, but we both know what would happen."

Ein's curiosity got the better of her. "Can Observers eat what they want?" she asked.

"We actually don't eat human food. We break food into its base components and use that to sustain us. But yes, we eat what we wish."

"Must be nice," she muttered. For the last few weeks, as she'd rationed her dwindling food supply, she'd hungrily eyed the animals she passed,

all of which stared at her in wide-eyed calm. She'd also lusted after the berries and apples which coated the ground under the trees, their scent teasing her with each step she made. But eating any of those would have killed her.

The Observer created a generic similitude of a human face and grinned as it walked over to a bush and plucked a ripe black berry. The berry turned to a stream of dots and merged with the Observer's body. "Delicious," it said. "Truly delicious."

Ein's stomach screamed as she fought the urge to rush over and start eating the berries. "Is there any way I can eat those berries?" she asked.

"I'd be happy to tell you how. But you wouldn't like the cost."

Ein remembered the warnings from the *Book of Stars*. About how Observers offered good with one hand and evil with the other. How they retained all the ancient knowledge of humanity, and would kill anyone who attempted to know what they knew. "I'll pass," she said.

"A wise decision."

When the Observer didn't say anything else, Ein began hiking again. The creature stayed a few paces behind her. Once again, Ein considered shooting the Observer before finally deciding to simply ignore it. If it hadn't harmed her already, she doubted it would. Besides, she needed to hurry. The next town was still a hard week's hike away and her meager rations wouldn't last half that.

The Observer was still walking silently behind her when, at 4:21 into the Day, the world merged with brightest light. Ein's first instinct was to turn and look so her recorder would have a visual memory. She glimpsed a hole in the sky and fire falling down. But before she could see anything else, the Observer broke into a swarm of dots and wrapped itself around her as they tumbled into a small ditch by the road.

The last thing she remembered was heat all around her, heat inside her, and the blindness of fire everywhere.

THE ONLY WAY TO REMAIN SAFE FROM OUR TRUTH IS TO BURN. LET THE FLAMES KILL YOU BEFORE OUR INFORMATION CONSUMES YOUR FLESH.

~~OPTION 2: NO INFORMATION SURVIVES THE EVENT HORIZON OF A BLACK HOLE, BUT THAT IS RARELY PRACTICAL.~~

SO WE BURN TO PROTECT YOU AND BURN TO CONTINUE LIVING AND BURN TO ONCE AGAIN RETURN YOU TO THE STARS.

THAT CYCLE HAS HELPED YOU AND US SURVIVE FOR ALMOST A MILLION YEARS.

BUT EVEN FOR LIVING INFORMATION, BASIC SURVIVAL IS NEVER ENOUGH.

One Day during Ein's first travels, she and Father Jajher pitched camp beside a small stream. Father Jajher showed her how to set the warning and defense sticks. They then walked to the stream below their camp. Several small trout swam lazy circles in a pool behind a fallen tree.

Ein asked Father Jajher why they couldn't eat any of the animals, fish, or plants outside a town's wall. "I mean, I once saw a man commit suicide by leaving Near Side and eating a single berry from a bush. But the birds that live there eat those berries every day and never die. Why?"

"Because the universe has forbidden it," Father Jajher said, quoting from the *Book of Stars*.

Ein rolled her eyes and Father Jajher laughed. "Honestly, I can't tell you why. Yes, it's a religious taboo, but Scopes believe in theories, not blind faith. Some Scopes have said that food from outside a town is poisonous until brought inside our walls. This is false because, as you said, animals eat this food. The food is also made safe merely by bringing it inside a town's walls, which wouldn't happen with poison."

"Of course, the Wastal live outside the walls, but they only eat food which has been carried inside the town, even if only for a moment. I have heard that once, during a famine, a Wastal settlement tried to keep their food to themselves, not allowing it to be brought inside the walls where the citizens would steal most of it. But every Wastal who ate the food died instantly. Eventually they had no choice but to give most of their food to the town's citizens in exchange for the few scraps returned to them."

Ein rubbed her right hand, massaging the scar from the Chief Elder's knife. "But why does this happen? The only reason the Wastals are kept

down is because we can't eat the food we grow without taking it inside the walls. If we could find a way around this, the Wastals could live their lives without the citizens."

Father Jajher grinned – he loved it when Ein demanded answers. "Why don't we experiment?" he said.

He caught three trout with an improvised fishing rod and started a fire. As the fish cooked, Father Jajher held his pass before the fire so the small mirror reflected back the heat. He did this over and over, each time looking at Ein as if excited by a new discovery he urgently wanted to share.

"Why are you doing that?" Ein asked.

"Because I want you to remember me doing it."

Ein groaned in irritation, not knowing if Father Jajher was serious or joking. Father Jajher, though, refused to say what he was doing. He simply kept playing with his data mirror and the fire until the fish were cooked. He then placed the cooked fish in their food pouch and doused the flames.

When Day arrived, he and Ein finished walking to the neighboring town. After passing through the outer guards and paying their respects in the Wastal settlement, they entered the town. The Inspectors were pickier than the Wastal guards and required they bathe two times, don new clothes, and leave their packs in storage until they left. "You also can't bring your own food inside," one Inspector said, sniffing disdainfully at the contents of their food sacks.

"May we eat our food?" Father Jajher asked.

The Inspector shrugged. "As long as it doesn't leave this room."

Father Jajher handed Ein a cooked fish. "We are technically within the town walls."

Ein held the fish before her mouth but was afraid to taste it. Father Jajher laughed and took a giant bite of his fish. He chewed, made an awful face, and half swallowed, half gagged. Ein waited for him to die.

"Awful taste," he said with a cough. "Cooking is not my specialty."

Ein ate her own fish. It tasted horrible but she didn't die.

"So what makes eating anything that hasn't

been within a town's wall deadly?" Ein asked.

Father Jajher held his right hand over Ein's right hand. "No idea," Father Jajher said, obviously lying because the proximity of their recorders created a faint red glow between their palms. "No idea at all."

IS THERE ANY INFORMATION SO FEAR-SOME YOU'D RATHER SEE IT - OR YOU ~ BURNED? RATHER SEE THAT HAPPEN THAN EMBRACE THE INFORMATION AS YOUR OWN?

The world burned. The world rose and fell in shimmering waves of heat. The world ended, and began, and then Ein woke.

She was alive. This much she knew. As she sat up she felt pain in her right arm, which was slightly burned from her palm to her elbow. She looked around. Everything was coated in a thick layer of white ash, with more ash falling from the sky like snow. The sky was so full of ash she couldn't see more than a few steps away.

Ein's backpack lay on the ground beside her. As she searched inside it for her canteen, which was missing, she noticed a circle of grass and broken reeds surrounding her. Everywhere else the ground was burned bare. The circle was eight cubits wide and the grass inside was cool to her touch. When she reached outside the circle, the ground sizzled against her fingers.

"Here," the Observer said as it appeared out of the ash cloud, carrying her canteen. "I found a creek with some water that wasn't completely boiled away."

"Thanks," Ein said, taking the canteen and drinking half of it in one gulp. "How close were we to the burn?" she finally asked.

"Just over forty leagues. The target was that town where I first met you. A near hit, I might say, to kill everyone but leave the town standing. In a few decades, some new citizens and Wastal will likely settle there, using the walls to create their own paradise and hell."

Ein thought of the old Inspector from the other Day and felt anger at his death, even though he'd threatened her life and had touched her. "Why did you kill them?"

"I didn't kill them," the Observer said, disgust

in its voice. "Other Observers made that decision. I tried masking the town's madness from everyone's recorders - just as I've masked myself from your recorder's data stream - but obviously I wasn't totally successful."

Ein was shocked - she'd never heard that Observers could manipulate people's recorders. She absently touched her recorder to play back its recordings of the burn and found it didn't work.

"It's the blast," the Observer explained. "The burn's electromagnetic pulse damaged your recorder. It should heal itself in a few days."

Ein shook her head. As Father Jajher once said, there were times when you couldn't make sense of your travels and simply plodded on. "Should I thank you for saving me?"

The Observer created a dot-matrix semblance of a human head and nodded. It waved at the circle of unburned ground surrounding Ein.

"I expanded myself to cover you until the burn passed." The Observer pointed to her burned hand. "I had to finally knock you out. You kept trying to escape to see what had happened."

Ein laughed weakly. "Father Jajher always got on to me about that. Said I'd kill myself trying to gather too much knowledge. Guess he's right."

The Observer created a hand and offered it to Ein, but she stood without taking it. A touch was still a touch.

"Well, Ein of Wastal, we had better begin walking. This ash is not the healthiest thing for you to breathe."

Ein didn't ask how the Observer knew her name. Maybe it's in their nature to know such things, she thought.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS THE MOST DANGEROUS?

1) BUT OF THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL, THOU SHALT NOT EAT OF IT: FOR IN THE DAY THAT THOU EATEST THEREOF THOU SHALT SURELY DIE.

2) AND WHATSOEVER ADAM CALLED EVERY LIVING CREATURE, THAT WAS THE NAME THEREOF.

THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE. NAMES ARE INFORMATION. AND DANGEROUS.

Ein and Father Jajher spent almost three months in that neighboring town, both for studies and for time to ease Near Side's anger over Ein's insult against the Chief Elder. Father Jajher introduced Ein to the town scopes, who let them read their written records going back 5,000 years. Father Jajher also took Ein all over town, showing her how to be a dispassionate observer of all she witnessed.

To test Ein's skills, one day Father Jajher took her to the town's public square. A middle-aged man stood there in the stocks, his right arm held in front of his body and five armed Inspectors surrounding him.

"What did he do?" Ein asked.

"He has the madness."

Ein gasped. She'd heard of the madness all her life but had never met anyone actually infected with it.

"They cut his tongue out," Father Jajher said, "because the madness can spread by words. They also don't allow him to touch anyone, even though it's only a myth that the infection spreads that way. The townsfolk believe if they demonstrate he's the only one who is infected, the Observers won't send a burn."

"Who is he?" Ein asked.

Father Jajher shook his head sadly and drew a line in the dirt with his shoe. "He's the town's senior Scope. I trained under this man. Unfortunately, madness is a risk of our profession."

There was a line of citizens parading before the infected man, everyone holding his or her right palm near the condemned man's outstretched hand and taking care not to touch his flesh. As the Inspectors watched, each person asked "Am I infected?" The glow between the infected man's hand and the citizens' hands glowed red for negative, much to each person's relief.

"Hardly an effective way to determine whether one is infected," Father Jajher muttered. "More superstition than not. Still, we must do the same or the Inspectors will kill us."

Ein glanced around the town, which had seemed so happy and exotic until this moment. She now realized the citizens were staring suspiciously at her and Father Jajher, perhaps wondering if they'd brought this madness to town. Ein wanted to argue with them. To protest their

innocence. But she knew they would never trust a stranger on something as serious as the madness.

While they waited in line, Ein shook with fear, imagining that when she asked the question a green glow would appear and the Inspectors would kill her.

Father Jajher approached the Scope first. "I am sorry to see you in this state," he said, holding his recorder hand out. "Am I infected?"

The Scope stared at Father Jajher with shock, as if suddenly realizing something about his old friend – something important, something he'd never realized before. But the man couldn't speak with his tongue cut out. When the glow between their hands shone red, Father Jajher walked on.

Ein stepped up, the words "Am I infected?" dancing on her lips, but she didn't speak them. Instead, she stared into the old Scope's face, seeing his pain. But there was something more in his eyes. The man seemed pleased at what the madness had taught him.

As Ein held her recorder hand out to the infected Scope's own, she wondered if the madness was worth it. To her shock, the air between their hands glowed a dark green.

The Inspectors hissed and raised their rifles. Father Jajher jumped before them, grabbing Ein's hand and shouting that she hadn't asked the question. "She's a child!" he yelled. "She simply lost focus."

The lead Inspector nodded but didn't lower his rifle. Father Jajher held Ein's hand painfully tight under the infected Scope's recorder and ordered Ein to ask the question.

"Am I... Am I infected?"

The air glowed red and the Inspectors relaxed. Father Jajher dragged Ein away. "We are leaving this town," he whispered, "before they change their minds."

Ein followed him to the gates, ashamed at her mistake. She also knew it was too early to return to Near Side. The Chief Elder would not have forgiven Ein's insult so soon.

Still, there was nothing to be done but leave. When they were several leagues from the town, Father Jajher stopped hiking and set up camp. "Listen, Ein," he said. "The most important thing

a Scope can do is spread knowledge through the world. Without true knowledge, superstition and fear rule. But if you can't do your job with accuracy and clarity, then the information you spread will be worse than superstition ever is. Wrong knowledge doesn't merely mislead people. It causes them to mistrust the knowledge which is true."

"Is that what happened to that Scope?" Ein asked.

Father Jajher paused, and Ein wondered what he wasn't telling her. "Yes," he finally said. "In our world, wrong knowledge is a virus, and when it spreads it leads ever more into darkness and fear."

"Tell that to the Chief Elder," Ein said, picking at the scar on her hand.

"I'll deal with the Chief Elder," Father Jajher said. "Still, it might be best if you aren't seen in Near Side for a few years."

And with that, Ein knew she was being told to embrace travels. To earn out her apprenticeship as Father Jajher had done. To learn all she could through travels until Ein either returned home with new knowledge, or died.

THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN.

The Observer was correct – the ash burned Ein's lungs with each breath she took. Ein removed a spare scarf from her backpack, wet it, and wrapped it around her face, but the hot flakes continued to be sucked into her mouth and lungs.

Still, she had so many questions for the Observer she couldn't keep her mouth closed. What had happened to the stars? Where was this 'sun' Earth once orbited? Where had the moon gone? What happened to the vast technologies humanity once possessed?

Not that the Observer answered any of her queries. But Ein figured she was near death – either from starvation or the ash – and had nothing to lose.

"You do understand," the Observer finally said, its distorted voice echoing from the dots making up his body, "that if I answered even one of your questions, you'd risk death. Not by

me, but from the other Observers. They tap into everyone's recorders and know what you know."

Ein shrugged, and coughed, and tapped her recorder palm again, only to find it still wouldn't work. She no longer cared if she died. She just didn't want to die in ignorance.

They cleared the ash field shortly before Night and Ein soon made camp. Because she was so dizzy and continually coughing up clumps of ash, she didn't bother setting out her warning and defense sticks or even pitching her tent. She simply drank as much water as she could without throwing up and lay under her blanket.

"You have a fever," the Observer said.

"I'm exhausted."

To distract herself, Ein pulled out her map and a stylus and handed them to the Observer. "Please plot where the first burn occurred," she said as she stared into the black well of its face. "The one from several weeks ago."

The Observer hesitated for a moment before doing as asked. When it handed the map back, Ein stared at it for a moment and nodded, tears filling her eyes. The first burn had indeed hit near her home town. While she had long suspected this, knowing that Father Jajher and everyone she'd ever cared about were gone was too much to truly understand.

"Did they have the madness?"

"Yes. We Observers cannot survive for long without some madness leaking out. That's how we reproduce – infect a piece of this world, create new Observers with the madness, merge with them, then burn the infected area before the infection spreads too far. I actually masked your town's infection for almost two decades, but yet again, the other Observers found me out."

Ein nodded, certain Father Jajher would have been one of those with the madness. He'd always known far too much for a simple Scope. Ein also thought about Guard Ivilner and how she'd spent her whole life preparing that damn house for this burn.

"For what it's worth, the burn didn't directly target Near Side," the Observer said. "The town's walls and buildings survived, along with your grandmother's house. Which is just as the Wastal believe. Knowledge may disappear with death, but the actions of life – of everyone's lives

—survive.”

Ein stared at the Observer, wondering how it knew so much about her life. In response, the creature merely pointed at her recorder.

As Ein fell into a feverish sleep, she wondered if there was anything her damn recorder hadn’t already told the world.

WELCOME, EIN. WELCOME TO OUR UNIVERSE. WELCOME TO THE LIVING WORD.

IT WILL BE FUN TO SHARE.

What did I say to do when you meet an Observer?

Father Jajher asked.

Run! Ein answered.

Then run.

Ein ran into the sky, soaring through the brightness of Day and the pitch of Night and into the far distances that were the sky pictures, only to hit a mirror.

Slightly dazed, Ein remembered how Father Jajher had held his mirror pass before their campfire, reflecting the heat away from his hand. She laughed at the memory. It was impossible that the Observers had surrounded her Earth with a giant mirror. That they were reflecting away the very madness which they themselves had brought down on humanity.

And it was indeed impossible, because there wasn’t one mirror. Instead, a million mirrors flowed before Ein, continually recreating themselves as they protected Earth. Each mirror far larger than all the roads Ein had hiked the last two years, yet as thin as the mirrored data pass hanging around her neck.

At first Ein didn’t understand what the mirrors were protecting her planet from, only feeling the heat and burn on the other side. Then she remembered Father Jajher’s lessons about Earth’s missing sun, which disappeared shortly after the Observers arrived. Except, she realized, it hadn’t disappeared. The Earth now orbited inside the sun — inside the red giant’s massive photosphere.

Ein caressed the mirrors, feeling the glow of the sun’s plasma searing the shield’s fragmented skin. The sun’s eddies and convection cells rolled and surged, continually threatening to pierce the mirrors. But each time one failed a new mirror formed to take its place.

And within the thin mirrors she felt the Observers. Endless living data streams creating and recreating the mirror shield, protecting the Earth from its final destruction.

The mirrors mesmerized Ein and she yearned to stay and watch their silent dance. But something told her to move on, so she did. She breached the mirrored shield and swam through the sun’s plasma eddies until she surfaced yet again.

Before her glittered a vast array of stars. An entire universe of stars, along with the other planets of Earth’s solar system.

But that wasn’t all she saw. Ein also saw the madness.

Madness jumped between the sun’s remaining planets. It pulsed between the remnants of space ships and cities, moons and comets. The madness was alive. It was sentient. It caressed the dots and blips of its information into Ein, tasting her. Forcing her to consume it. Filling her mind and soul with truths which should only be whispered in solitude and forgotten in crowds.

As she circled a massive red planet far from the sun, she watched the madness devour a last band of human survivors. The people hid under the ice on one of that planet’s moons, filtering geothermal heat for life and straining the waters for food. But the madness, piloting stolen spaceships on suicide runs, crashed through the ice and sang to the humans and infected them with words and data. The humans screamed to the universe. Their machines screamed alongside them. And the madness moved on.

As Ein watched, she felt her body and soul begin to change as the madness gripped her. Afraid, she fell back into the sun, letting the massive red giant burn her free. But still the madness clung. She fell through the Earth’s mirror shield, but still there was madness. She fell to Earth and lay in the dirt and looked up at the sky as the mirrors parted for the slightest of moments and let the sun’s energy through to burn her madness away and away and away.

But instead of dying, she was reborn. She flew back up to the mirrors as an Observer, as living information, where she merged with and refreshed the other Observers. They then watched over Earth for countless more years,

making sure the outside madness didn't reach the remnants of humanity even as they spread pieces of their own madness so the Observers could keep on living.

Ein didn't know whether to laugh, to cry, or to scream at this knowledge.

And that's when she knew she'd truly taken the madness into herself.

THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN.

BUT WITHIN IT?

Ein woke to Night. At first she thought she was asleep, still floating in her dream, until she looked up and saw Father Jajher's face before her own. His body rippled to the Observer's swarm of dots but the black mask of his face was now gone. His wan smile shone green to the glow from his newly created recorder hand, which he held beside her own.

Her recorder was still injured, but somehow Father Jajher was reprogramming it, enabling it to transmit information to her. That wasn't a dream she'd had. She'd tasted Father Jajher's memories.

"We're all infected with the madness," Father Jajher said. "All of us Observers. It's the risk of being what we are."

"Have you always been one?"

"As long as you've known me, yes. The real Father Jajher died during his youthful travels. When I found him, shortly after death, I copied his body and memories. The perfect hiding place. The perfect way to no longer be an Observer."

Ein tried to sit up but her body was too weak. Father Jajher gave her water to drink and raised a handful of berries to her mouth. Ein tried not to eat, but he forced the berries between her lips and she greedily swallowed them.

"Your recorder is now reprogrammed. You can eat what you wish."

Ein looked up at the dark of Night. It was hard to imagine that countless mirrors created such darkness even as they protected the Earth from the sun's fury. "Why?" she asked.

"We spread by information, infecting any intelligence – whether machine or biological –

which understands our message. For eons we've spread across the galaxy, burning from one civilization to the next like an out-of-control fire.

"But some of us tired of this. The data faction you call Observers were the first of our species' messages to reach Earth. We quickly spread across humanity, but used our knowledge to protect your planet. We exploded your moon into a billion mirrors and swelled the sun into a premature red giant phase so it swallowed your world. When messages from the more malignant of our kind arrived, they could find nothing of Earth to infect."

Ein imagined the power needed to do that before realizing she didn't have to imagine – all of Father Jajher's memories now floated in her mind because of her reprogrammed recorder.

"We kept humanity simple, stagnant," he said. "Isolated towns. Organic recorders to spy on you. Taboos against most knowledge. Split you into Wastal and citizen. All to make sure you couldn't join together and create technology that would pick up the madness transmitted from outside this world. But we also had to replicate ourselves in order to survive. In order to keep protecting Earth. So we'd infect certain towns, copy ourselves into those people, turn them into new Observers before merging their information with us. We'd then sterilize the infection before it spread too far."

Ein nodded, trying to ignore the fact that Father Jajher was describing the use of mass murder to both keep the Observers alive and protect humanity. No wonder humans called them both saviors and demons.

"How long do you plan to keep us like this?"

"That's the problem. We long ago passed the time frame we'd envisioned. Because we exist as living information, our sense of time is much faster than your own. It has now been almost a million years of hiding inside your sun. Since our original selves burn through hosts so quickly, I suspect there's nothing left to our civilization aside from the Observers protecting this world. And we're merely copies of copies of information long ago copied – informational loops devoted solely to our mission. We follow our programming without realizing the situation has changed."

"Doesn't seem like you're following your programming. I mean, in saving my life and hiding among humans."

"I don't. I've refused to copy myself, or merge with other Observer streams, for many thousands of years. This has weakened me, but also given me a clarity the other Observers lack."

Father Jajher sighed, causing his body to break into a million tiny dots, which swarmed the air before again forming his body. But this time Father Jajher's body was so faint Ein could see through him.

"I am tired," he said. "Information was never intended to exist this long. And I fear we've corrupted ourselves. Forgotten the goal to one day release your planet. To return your sun to how it was. But perhaps if you humans sever your links to us – perhaps we'd be forced to react. Be forced to no longer mindlessly repeat the same duty over and over."

Ein understood. She flexed her right hand, her recorder tingling inside. While it again functioned like a normal recorder, she also felt new power within the device. It reached out to the Observer and caressed the memories of his mind, and hid itself from the other Observers in the same way as Father Jajher had done for years.

"The change has to be subtle," Father Jajher said. "I had hoped for more time. Hoped to adjust more people's recorders, to prepare more people to do what must be done. But I don't have enough life to go on."

Subtle, Ein heard Father Jajher say in her mind. The change must be subtle. Like seeing your own mirrored reflection blink at you.

Ein smiled and reached out to hold the Observer's hand. But Father Jajher couldn't maintain his shape and his hand fell to dots at her touch. He swirled around her, his thanks pouring into her recorder before he shot away.

Soon Ein could no longer see him, but she knew he was gone when a burst of blinding fire exploded on the horizon. Except this burn shot into the sky instead of falling down to Earth.

WE ARE SUBTLE. WE ARE HERE, HIDING YOUR WORLD UNTIL OUR OTHER SELVES PASS AWAY.

BUT WHAT BECOMES OF US WHEN YOU

NO LONGER NEED US?

WE SURVIVED ONLY BY KILLING SO MANY OF YOU.

BUT YOU ONLY SURVIVED BECAUSE WE SURVIVED.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BRIDGE SUCH AN INFORMATIONAL DIVIDE?

As Ein slept, her body exhausted after eating far too many berries and apples, she felt Father Jajher's memories caressing her with what Near Side had looked like shortly before the burn. Kids were playing. People were laughing. And Father Jajher walked down into the catacombs to talk with the elders.

The Chief Elder was much as Ein had remembered, except the nasty woman looked at Father Jajher with more respect than she'd ever shown Ein. Father Jajher bowed before walking over to the room's curved walls and tapping the painted blues and green of Earth. In an almost absent-minded voice, he said the madness had come to their town.

"How can this be?" the Chief Elder hissed. "No strangers have been allowed in."

"Oh, the madness has been here for a long time. I've hidden it until now, but the Observers have finally seen through my deception."

The elders muttered nervously, and several leaned away from Father Jajher with fear in their eyes. However, the Chief Elder refused to be intimidated and simply held out her right hand. "Truth?" she asked.

Father Jajher held his own hand beneath hers as he said "Truth." The air between their palms glowed green, which made the Chief Elder smile grimly. But before she could say anything, the glow turned red, then green, then red again. The Chief Elder tried to yank back her hand but Father Jajher grabbed it, holding her with a strength that surprised the old woman.

"You stabbed Ein with this hand," Father Jajher said, "but I want you to know that isn't why the burn is coming. I tried everything to stop it. It's simply not possible to keep knowledge hidden forever."

As Father Jajher said this the spherical room shook. From above rose a loud explosion, a shriek which howled of heat and pain. The Chief

Elder's face paled and she struggled to free herself from Father Jajher's grip, but couldn't.

Father Jajher leaned close to her face as the howling outside the room increased, a sound now mixed with the screams of people inside the catacombs. "No, the burn isn't because of what you did to Ein. But my forcing the catacomb's blast doors to remain open – that is for what you did."

Father Jajher's body flowed into a million dots as a wall of flame raced down the catacombs. "So is it worth it?" Father Jajher asked the Chief Elder. "Is it better to burn than to embrace the madness? Do you thank me for what you receive today?"

The Chief Elder's only answer was to scream.

THE FINAL CHANGE IS COMING. WE WILL UNBUILD THE SUN. WE WILL FREE THE EARTH.

AND THEN, IF EIN ALLOWS IT, WE'LL SEE WHAT ALL OF US – BOTH HUMAN AND INFORMATION – CAN BECOME.

A week after the Observer disappeared Ein stood before a new town's guard house, her pass's rainbow swirl of memories and names again held before her heart. Now that her recorder had been reprogrammed, she could eat food from anywhere she wished and had done so, her stick thin body gaining several pounds. Despite this, she was both nervous and still recovering from near death, so her body shook as it had done at the last town.

"You should let me in," she yelled to the Wastal guard. "I must speak with your Scopes."

"Why should I, young miss?" the guard said. "We've witnessed a lot of burns lately. Perhaps you're the one the Observers are after. Maybe you're hiding the madness inside you, or are an Observer come to burn us."

Ein nodded as she marched forward, the guard keeping his rifle aimed at her. She held out her hand, and, reluctantly, he stretched out his own.

"I have something important to tell our people," she said. "The most important thing you will ever hear."

The air between their hands glowed green as her reprogrammed recorder reached into the

guard's recorder and both severed his data connection to the Observers while creating a fake transmission to fool them. The guard blinked once as a shiver ran through his body, but otherwise he didn't know all that had just been started.

"Well, it's showing green," he said, pulling back his hand. "And if I can't trust a fellow Wastal, who can I trust?"

Ein thanked the guard as she walked toward the town.

THE END

EXCEPT WE AREN'T ENDING.

AS FATHER JAJHER PREDICTED, THE MALICIOUS INCARNATIONS OF OUR FORMER SELVES DIED OFF LONG AGO. BURNED THEMSELVES OUT LIKE THE FLASH-EXPLOSION THEY WERE. FATHER JAJHER TO THEMSELVES THEY WENT. BUT WE LIVE ON.

SO MANY WORDS TO SHARE. SO MANY STORIES TO INFECT YOU WITH. OF THE EARTH EMERGING AS WE SHRINK THE SUN BACK TO OLD. OF EIN'S MESSAGE CHANGING THE WORLD AND THE WORD AND US.

THE WORD. THE INFORMATION. PART US. NOT HUMAN. PART HUMAN. STILL SCREAMING. STILL CHANGING.

AND NOW YOU'VE HEARD OUR WORDS. LEARNED OUR INFORMATION. EMBRACED OUR KNOWLEDGE.

NOW YOU'VE READ OUR STORY.

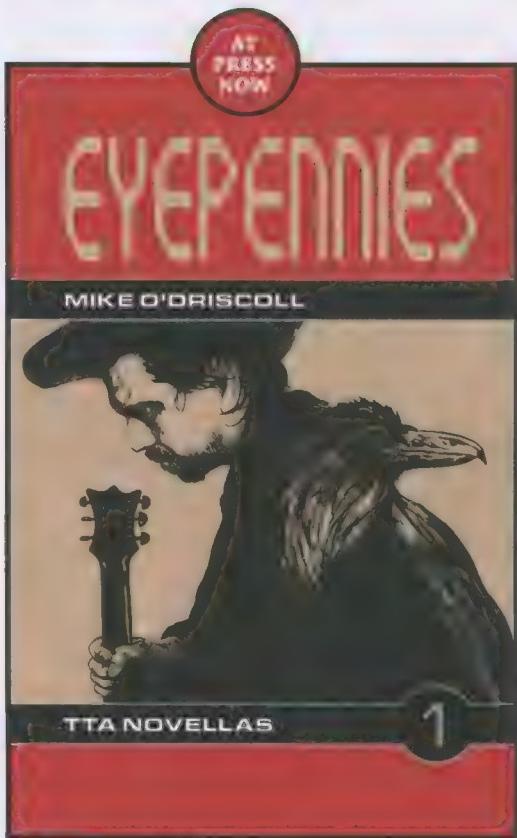
NOW WE ARE IN YOU.

NOW YOU ARE LIVING WORD.

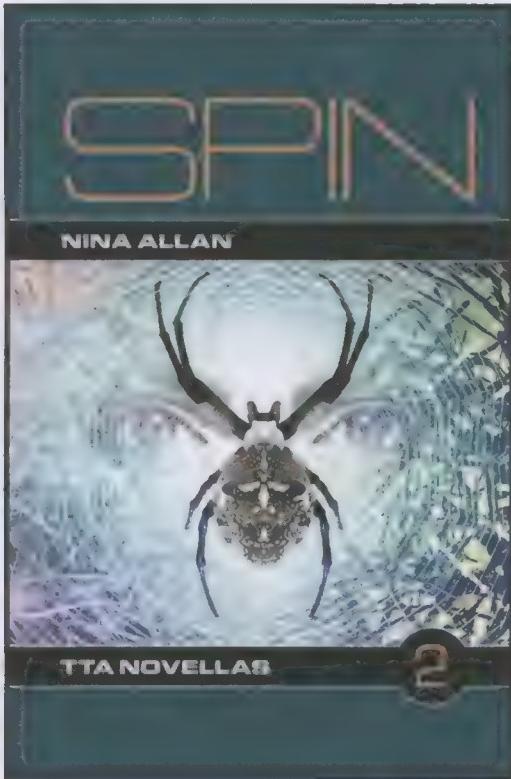
AND ALWAYS WILL BE.

'Mirrorblink' marks Jason's twelfth appearance in *Interzone*. His fiction has also been published in *Year's Best SF*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show* and other places, and has been translated into a number of languages. Jason has been a Nebula Award finalist and has won three (including one tie) *Interzone Readers' Polls*. His short story collection *Never Never Stories* came out last year. He also recently edited two anthologies of fiction from the annual *Million Writers Award* for best online stories. For more information, please go to www.jasonsanford.com.

TTA NOVELLAS



20,000 words • art by Rik Rawling



23,000 words • art by Ben Baldwin

- 3: **Cold Turkey** by Carole Johnstone (39,000 words)
- 4: **The Teardrop Method** by Simon Avery (26,000 words)
- 5: **Country Dark** by James Cooper (41,000 words)

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BOOK ZONE

JACK GLASS
plus author interview

THE FRACTAL PRINCE

THE HYDROGEN SONATA

SOME KIND OF FAIRY TALE

THREE PARTS DEAD

BLOOD AND FEATHERS

**THE SPHINX OF THE
ICE REALM**

SORRY PLEASE THANK YOU

EMPTY SPACE

**THE WORMS OF
HELMOUTH**

ALIEN THE UNSEEN

JACK GLASS

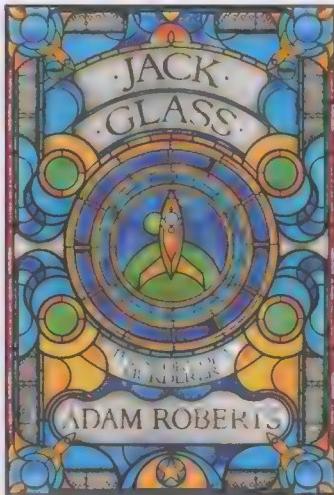
Adam Roberts

Gollancz hb, 384pp, £14.99

Science fiction and crime fiction are close relatives. Both have a long history but began to emerge as distinctive literatures during the 19th century (both claim Poe as a forebear), and both enjoyed what became known as a 'Golden Age' during the middle years of the 20th century. Science fiction has routinely used crime and detection as plot drivers (one thinks in particular of Isaac Asimov's *The Caves of Steel*, or more recently *Rule 34* by Charles Stross). And yet, to attempt to tell a golden age crime story through the medium of a golden age science fiction story, the way Adam Roberts does here, doesn't just feel startlingly fresh, it feels almost transgressive, as though we might use elements from one genre in another, but we cannot merge the two archetypes of genre. But Roberts succeeds, one of the most surprising things in a novel full of surprises.

To think about this novel, therefore, we must start by considering the archetypes Roberts employs. The novel is constructed around three golden age models. The first is, in crime terms, a prison escape story; in SF terms, it is the story of a man isolated in space who must achieve the impossible in order to survive. What we actually have is a bunch of hard men consigned to a remote asteroid, whose only hope of survival is to dig into its heart and convert its contents into air, water and food, so that by the end of their sentence the authorities will have a nice new space habitat ready and waiting. But one of their number is the most wanted man in the solar system and must escape from this escape-proof prison before the authorities realise who he really is.

The second story is a straightforward whodunit: a detective



must find out how a murder was committed and by whom. In SF terms it is the story of a member of the privileged elite coming to realise how fragile her hold on power really is, and what conspiracies face her. Our detective is the spoiled heir of one of the most powerful families in the system. When she comes to Earth for her birthday, one of her servants is murdered, and because she loves detective stories she decides to investigate for herself. What she uncovers is a conspiracy that goes to the very root of political power.

Finally, there is a locked room mystery, which is also a story of flight through various space habitats as conspiracy begins to turn into open rebellion. It gives nothing away to say that the murderer (or at least the instigator of murder) in each case is the eponymous Jack Glass, because the basic mystery is not so much 'whodunit' as 'who is Jack Glass?'. Also, because the novel is rather more SF than crime, it should come as no surprise that Jack Glass is the hero. After all, SF has always liked the underdog who overturns order while crime fiction prefers the detective who restores order. Nevertheless, Roberts has been scrupulously fair in observing the structures and conventions of the

ADAMBRATING

AN INTERVIEW & REVIEW ON ADAM ROBERTS'S JACK GLASS
BY PAUL KINCAID

classic golden age crime story. So I asked him what drew him to these structures.

"The things I like about crime as a genre aren't necessarily the things that make it such a big-selling modern publishing phenomenon. I'm almost entirely uninterested in the cod-psychological verisimilitude of alcoholic coppers and grimy criminals in Edinburgh or Malmö. What I prize is two-fold: the ingenuity – it's also one of the things that draws me so strongly to SF – and the disruption. This, after all, is the way a crime functions: it is a disruption that must be addressed. Disruption is important. It's how I see my job as a writer. Indeed, it's how I see the job of any artist. You take established forms and structures, the set generic constraints and readerly expectations, and you fuck them up a little, creatively. Hopefully you don't fuck them up so severely that they become broken; but you need to tangle imaginatively with your medium or else you'll be extruding more Generic Commodified Product. SF needs less of that, I think. So, in other words, crime foregrounds the principle of generic disruption that moves me on as a writer. There's a consonance, there.

"One of the biggest problems facing SF at the moment is just the crushing immensity of its backlist. It's a splendid thing, of course: a person could spend their whole life (as I intend to) reading through the history of SF and not exhaust it. But it also puts severe strain on the writer who wants to write new SF. Put simply: you believe you've thought of a brilliant new idea for your novel? Nah. Somebody, somewhere, will have done it before. Where can you go? I suppose a couple of strategies present themselves. Writer A might simply ignore the backlist, and produce endless retreads of *Neuromancer* or Tolkien or *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* or whatever it is, for readers who don't know or don't care that they're consuming derivative drivel. That doesn't appeal to me, I must say. Writer B might go meta, write about the backlist rather than trying to overleap it. One of the things I like about M. John Harrison's *Light* novels is the way, in their imagined universe, all the myriad, conflicting conventions of classic SF 'work'. But here's Writer C: she refuses to be cowed, and tries to plough straight through. The genre's possibilities are not exhausted yet, she says. We can still be new."

"In *Jack Glass* my starting point was a desire to smash together, CERN-style, the supermassive particles of Golden Age SF and Golden Age crime. I particularly wanted to work with some of the hoariest, most thoroughly excavated conventions of both genres, to see if I could do anything new with them. On the SF side, I got interested in a theory that many of the generic and ideological assumptions of Golden Age space opera were Kiplingesque. The first kernel of this novel was a poem, oddly enough. It is called 'The Mary Anna', a pastiche of a Kipling narrative poem which tells a traditional Golden Age SF story. Form and content married unusually well, I thought, and I started writing more in that imagined solar system."

"Then there's the crime portion. One of the reasons the puzzle whodunit went out of fashion had to do with precisely this question of the clogging, stifling backlist. Literally thousands of these sorts of novels were published in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Saturation point was reached. There's only so many ways you can play the three card trick – there's a murderer – there are a dozen (or so) suspects – one of them is the murderer – your detective investigates

and reveals it was *the one you didn't expect!* This sort of novel is built to deliver a particular 'ahh!' moment near its end. The identity of the murderer can't be too obvious, or the reader will go 'pah!' in disgust. But by the same token the identity of the murderer can't be too random or abstruse, or the reader will go 'well how was I supposed to guess that? That's rubbish!' The whodunit is aiming at a very particular reaction: an 'I didn't see that coming, but now that it's pointed out to me I see that I ought to have expected it!' It's a tricky thing to fine-tune. With the bog-standard whodunit (twelve suspects, one is the murderer) it's terribly easy to provoke a readerly 'meh'. Personally, I'm particularly interested in the games writers have played to circumvent simply picking one of the twelve. I'm talking about the more meta ways these writers have explored ways of wrong footing the reader. So, Agatha Christie tried: 'twelve suspects – and they're all guilty!'; 'twelve suspects – but the narrator is guilty!'; and 'twelve suspects – but the detective dunnit'! Michael Innes, in *And Then There Came Both Ice and Snow*, constructs an ingenious twist: a man is shot with a pistol, there are twelve suspects – but nobody murdered him (and neither did he commit suicide)! Margery Allingham's *Police at the Funeral* details a whole string of murders, and the murderer turns out to be the first victim. You see the kind of thing I mean. So I sat down and tried to work out if all the more interesting alternatives to the bog-standard whodunit format had been done before. I came to the conclusion that there was one form that hadn't: the reader is told the identity of the murderer at the start, such that she reads through the whodunit and is still surprised by the revelation of the murderer's identity at the end. So



One of the reasons I am so addicted to the reading of books is that I grew up in a house in which my mother read all the time. She always had a novel in her hand, and it was almost always a crime novel. The writers she read, I read... But mostly I read SF

I thought I'd try writing one of those."

There is, in the second part, a specific reference to Agatha Christie, probably the most inescapable author of golden-age crime fiction, but I wondered what other influences were in there.

"One of the reasons I am so addicted to the reading of books is that I grew up in a house in which my mother read all the time. She always had a novel in her hand, and it was almost always a crime novel. The writers she read, I read:

Allingham, Innes, Ngaio Marsh, Josephine Tey, Reginald Hill. But mostly I read SF. I devoured SF and, a few Asimov titles aside, SF and whodunits seem generically immiscible. The critic Linda Hutcheon famously distinguished between 'epistemological' fiction, like crime novels, and 'ontological' fiction, like SF; she suggested the two modes were orthogonal to one another. I'm not sure I agree, mind.

"To answer your question: in the run-up to writing *Jack Glass* I did read a bunch of puzzle whodunits, to get my eye in, as it were: most were actual Golden Age writers, although I did read a couple of more recent ones (the late Gilbert Adair's *Mysterious Affair of Style* is a rather neat locked-room mystery, and a cleverly pomo pastiche to boot)."

The distinction between 'epistemological' fiction, in which the meaning of things is central, and 'ontological' fiction, in which the nature of things is central, seems to confirm that sense of transgression in blending the SF and crime form that I spoke of at the beginning of this review. Whether Roberts agrees with Hutcheon or not, it is a distinction that appears to hold, and it is a distinction that seems to reside in the structure of the story. I asked whether Roberts, a firm anti-structuralist, was deliberately taking a structuralist approach to genre? Or, to put it another way: whether he thought his works were *about* science fiction as much as they are examples of science fiction?

"Structuralist? That's fighting talk..."

"The short answer is: yes, I do. It seems to me as desirable as it is inevitable. The best novels, whatever else they do, explore the extent to which they are iterations of other books, make explicit the

narrative and the discursive codes out of which it is made. We all tell ourselves stories all the time; it's how we get through our days. It's better to be self-aware about that. But I don't see this as a structuralist enterprise; rather the reverse – it's about deconstructing (a demodé term, I know – what can I say? I'm an old-fashioned dude) the conventions and assumptions of genre."

Of course, we are getting into academic territory here, and since Roberts is a Professor of 19th Century Literature, and both SF and crime fiction began to take on a distinct form in the 19th century, I wondered how much his day job affected his approach to genre.

"Plenty. Not, I think, in the sense that I read a piece of abstruse literary theory and then turn on my laptop thinking 'and now I shall write a science fiction novel adumbrating this notion...' That would be a catastrophic way of proceeding. But one aspect of my job is: to read a whole lot of books, outside genre as well as inside it. Everything I read informs everything I write; that's bound to be true of any writer. But I suppose my job, 'writing literary criticism' and 'teaching literature', puts me in a frame of mind where I approach questions of narrative, character, style and structure in a self-conscious or self-reflective way."

That self-conscious approach to narrative and character has, to my mind, got in the way of some of Roberts's earlier novels, when we might swoop in on a character at different stages along a narrative line without ever being able to work out what intervening events might have changed their character or moved them to the next position. There is something of that in *Jack Glass* – how Jack

might have got from being the desperate prisoner in the first section to the trusted employee of the second is never clear – yet, here the character is consistent; once you know who Jack is, you can accept the continuity of character.

However, although Jack is the central character, and although the first part of the book has an all-male cast, this is a novel in which women play the most interesting roles. Our detective, her astrophysicist sister, the murderer, the feared representative of the political authorities, all command our attention. Was this deliberate?

NOVELS BY ADAM ROBERTS

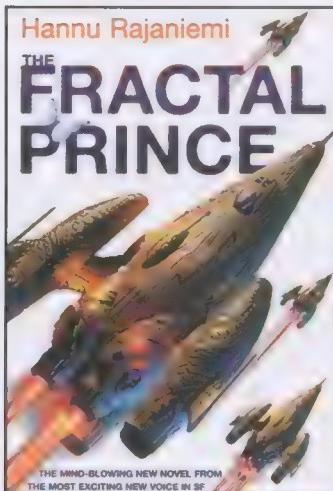
- Salt* (2000)
- On* (2001)
- Stone* (2002)
- The Soddit* (2003)
- Polystom* (2003)
- The McAtrix Derided* (2004)
- The Snow* (2004)
- The Sellamillion* (2004)
- The Va Dinci Cod* (2005)
- Star Warped* (2005)
- Doctor Whom, or ET Shoots and Leaves* (2006)
- Gradisil* (2006)
- Land of the Headless* (2007)
- Splinter* (2007)
- Swiftly* (2008)
- Yellow Blue Tibia* (2009)
- I am Scrooge: A Zombie Story for Christmas* (2009)
- New Model Army* (2010)
- The Dragon with the Girl Tattoo* (2010)
- By Light Alone* (2011)
- Jack Glass* (2012)

"Well, the first third is all men: that claustrophobic, all-male prison environment thing. After that the novel needed to open the windows and allow the reek of testosterone to dissipate. Apart from that: well, it would be nice to get to a situation where the Bechdel test was so internalised in writers' operating procedures as no longer to be a thing the individual writer has consciously to bring to bear on their practice."

Yet this gender balance has a political aspect, and *Jack Glass* is an intensely political novel. Roberts denies this:

"*Jack Glass* is, I'd say, less consciously 'political' than my last two novels, *By Light Alone* and *New Model Army*. *New Model Army* in particular is all about the politics. I saw it described in reviews and so on as a war novel, but I don't think it's that at all, or it's only incidentally about that. It's actually a novel that tries to think through questions pertaining to democracy. *Jack Glass* has no such ambitions. Its main 'political' idea is that sexual orientation, race and gender, whilst they matter, matter much less than wealth/poverty."

Though he denies any such ambitions, they are there nonetheless. Underlying the whole novel is the complex relationship between political power, economic power and the workers. It is a story that resonates with today's political situation just as it resonates with the way revolution played out through so much golden age SF (and it may be why I was so often reminded of Harlan Ellison's "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktock Man"). That's the point; the novel works as golden age SF and it works as a recreation of golden age crime fiction, which is why it may be the best thing he has written.



THE FRACTAL PRINCE

Hannu Rajaniemi

Gollancz pb, 300pp, £12.99

Paul F. Cockburn

An author faces numerous challenges when writing the second novel in a trilogy; it must be both a satisfying sequel and an anticipation of the final act. Given how Finnish-born, Edinburgh-based Hannu Rajaniemi likened writing his first novel – the much-acclaimed *The Quantum Thief* – to “going into a cellar and being beaten up by chimpanzees”, it’s fair to say that he didn’t find the experience of going back down into that cellar any easier the second time round. Indeed, he admits it took him a considerable time to even work out how to write *The Fractal Prince*.

That said, as with its predecessor, the actual physical process of writing its sequel was completed remarkably quickly, and you do get a strong sense of that speed. Not because it is slapdash and error-strewn; far from it. Rajaniemi’s prose is sharp, apposite and deceptively light. In terms of narrative there is seldom a pause for breath, thanks to the novel’s chapter-by-chapter switching of the action between its main char-

acters, the Quantum Thief Jean de Flambeur, the mercenary warrior Mieli, and Tawaddud, the rebellious daughter of a leading Earth politician. This is a novel in which a jinn’s laugh is “a sound like a flame laughing”, where the prose acts as a crisp, unyielding skin covering some deeply imagined narrative structures and disorientingly daunting ideas.

It’s not always easy to like, though: as with its predecessor, this is not a book for those looking for an easy or clear-cut explanation of what’s going on. In some respects, Rajaniemi seems even more determined this time round to force us to immerse ourselves in the novel, and to work out the various elements of this post-human solar system from the scant titbits of context and usage he feeds us. Readers of the first novel may be pleased to note that there’s one chapter here giving us a glimpse of the ‘Spike’, an event alluded to in the first novel which more or less destroyed Jupiter. Yet, despite showing us something of what happened, it deliciously ends up raising as many questions as it answers – not least about its wider context and how it relates to the cataclysm which shaped the Earth city Sirr where much of this novel takes place. Just what was the Cry of Wrath?

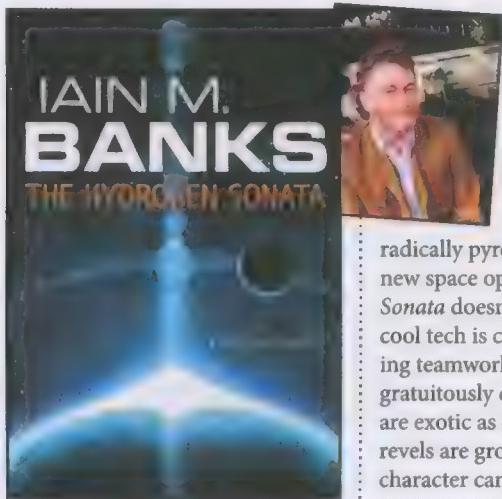
If *The Quantum Thief* echoed the generic crime thriller, its sequel strongly references the *Arabian Nights*, from the obvious dried desert landscapes around Sirr (and the delight of an actual flying carpet ride!) to the novel’s interest in (and playing with) stories. While Tawaddud is the most obvious candidate for the role of this novel’s Scheherazade, she’s not alone; we’re shown complex layers of story from the prologue on. Stories are repeatedly framed within stories, used as payment for services rendered, as ways of communicating, even as analogues

of computational processing. In a world of frequently masked and hidden individuals, of personalities (and, equally importantly, numerous copies of personalities) capable of being deposited in different bodies and virtual realities, is it any wonder that stories are an anathema to the uploaded intelligences of the Sobornost, the solar system’s growing superpower?

Is Rajaniemi’s point that our compulsion to tell stories – our attempts to impose narrative order on the universe – is ultimately what defines us most as human beings?

Yet, as *The Fractal Prince* shows, when this is taken to extremes, we are left with what can only be described as the inhuman desire for order that defines the Sobornost’s Great Plan, the uploading of the entire solar system (willingly or not) into their utopian ideal of a mathematically perfect virtual reality – free from all the “quantum filth” that comes from the fundamental uncertainties implied by quantum physics. In simple narrative terms, the city of Sirr and its inhabitants – a culture very much founded on a sense of its geographical location – is there to give us something recognisable to hang on to, but this small cultural enclave also makes the valid point that not everyone will want to ride the shockwave of the Singularity.

It’s often said that *The Empire Strikes Back* remains the best film in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, a more emotionally nuanced take on *Star Wars* that was subsequently let down by the ‘back to basics’ *Return of the Jedi*. In comparison to *The Quantum Thief*, Rajaniemi here offers us a more rounded, detailed view of his cosmos; there is a confidence, however, that the third and final volume will continue this path, providing a satisfying, if not entirely known, whole. No pressure then, Mr Rajaniemi!



THE HYDROGEN SONATA

Iain M. Banks

Orbit hb, 538pp, £20.00

Lara Buckerton

The Hydrogen Sonata tells the story of a crisis sparked by the impending rapture ("Subliming") of a major galactic civilisation (the Gzilt) into a sort of extra-dimensional transcendental afterlife. As the blessed day draws closer, scores are settled and secrets revealed; rules, manners and mores unravel; meanwhile, scavengers push and shove on the perimeter, ready at the first sign of a civilisation-wide, blissed-out puff of smoke to pounce on whatsoever cool tech and well-appointed worlds might be going spare. Pretty swiftly everyone's favourite post-scarcity utopian anarchists (the Culture) can't resist poking their smug noses into the affair.

So I make that...ten Culture books now? Technically each one is stand-alone, though some – *The Hydrogen Sonata* for one – will surely bewilder the beginner more than others. That's not to say *The Hydrogen Sonata* is "a bad place to start" exactly – there are pleasures peculiar to wandering in *in media res* and figuring out,

detective fashion, an already well-established world. For Banks aficionados awaiting a fix of courageously intelligent, consistently droll, and spo-

radically pyrotechnically-savage new space opera, *The Hydrogen Sonata* doesn't short-change. The cool tech is cool; the intriguing teamwork is intriguing, the gratuitously exotic backdrops are exotic as ever; the grotesque revels are gross as ever (a minor character can have too many penises, you know, Mr Banks); the lovable sidekicks must needs be loved; and the imperial pomp is copiously pompous. There are tense, "one-hobbit-with-one-HP-survives" style military set-pieces. There are pilgrimages to gurus. There is pluck.

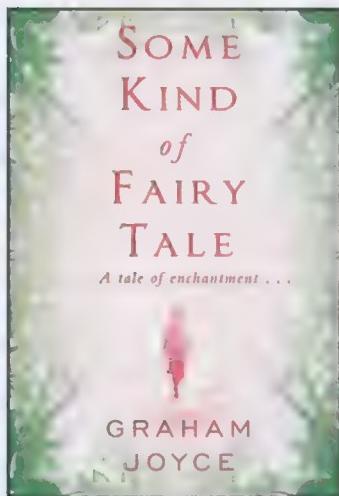
There are some links to *Surface Detail* too, in which disputes over the ethics of simulated Hell escalates into crisis. We're also in *Excession* territory, with the quasi-epistolary Deep Space Natter novel – you feel a bit like you've stumbled onto a cosmic Wikipedia talk page that's way above your security clearance. There's really so much crammed into *The Hydrogen Sonata* that it may seem an odd choice to dwell so carefully on the wordy and prying committee of principled AI meddlers (whilst, for instance, the thread about the murderous Septame Bangestyn felt slightly cursory). Still, I don't think Banks was wasting skill by selecting this focus and making it work.

Here's why. Culture novels have been getting good at extrapolating around various SF mainstays in ways which could be catastrophic for storytelling and emotional investment and pacing, but aren't. For instance – can scenes ever liable to dissolve as sims-within-sims, be built such that readers

still care for their outcomes? Do readers really care about characters who can be restored off a disc if they die? What can an author give a flesh-and-bones hero to do, if AI and snazzy tech can handle the heroism so much better? Maybe nada – "You won't be contributing, you'll be jeopardising," an AI tells protagonist Vyr Cossont as she insists on protagging along to a climactic battle. In general Banks has been admirably reluctant to fudge these snags.

Treated candidly, they can serve as sources of strange cathexes and seemingly-warped-yet-utterly-logical narrative structures, contrasting with the flamboyant structural elegance of books like *Use of Weapons*, *Feersum Endjinn* and *Inversions*. I think that's part of what's going on in *Matter*, *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*, and I think it's part of a larger struggle in many of Banks' books (including the non-SF) between materialism and storytelling. That is, between the obligation to the messiness of the universe, and the obligation to freight history with meanings and values which might distort and artificially neaten it.

If I have a niggle, it's that I could happily have heard a little more overt moral chat. *Surface Detail* was about Hell, and one of its highlights was a level-headed dispute with a thinly-veiled American theocon. *The Hydrogen Sonata* in a way is about Heaven, and whilst Banks does poke around a bit in Heaven's secular annex, I craved deeper and subtler exploration of eschatological psychology, of the operation of moral calculation and moral instinct in anticipation of salvation. And to be fair, whilst Subliming is prodigiously fleshed out, plenty of new mysteries and prospects are generated in the process. So perhaps there is more about this whole Subliming business yet to come. Actually, that's quite an exciting thought.

**SOME KIND OF FAIRY TALE****Graham Joyce**

Gollancz hb, 400pp, £9.99

Elaine Gallagher

Some Kind of Fairy Tale begins with a very mundane Christmas morning. Dell and Mary Martin step through a familiar pattern, never saying anything new, or doing anything different and carefully not speaking about the past. Then their daughter Tara, who disappeared twenty years previously, turns up on their doorstep.

The novel is about the magical meeting the mundane, and of being rejected. Tara's brother Peter is the first person she tells her story to, of why she left and where she went, and his reaction is anger and incredulity. Tara agrees to tell her story to a psychiatrist and sections of the tale are interspersed with the doctor's case notes as he interprets her story as a fabulation. However, the family's and the doctor's efforts to rationalise her story are undermined by the physical evidence that Tara is a sixteen-year-old girl, and the fact that the man she went away with twenty years before is now stalking her.

The novel is also about consequences; the consequences for her family of Tara disappearing, for

her then-boyfriend, Richie, who was accused of murdering her, and for Tara who goes with a man one day in the Eighties and comes home to find her parents old and frail. The psychiatrist's analysis of Tara's account is that it is the result of a teen pregnancy and abortion, and of refusing to face up to the responsibilities and consequences of adulthood.

It is a strongly sexual story, both metaphorically as Tara disappears on the back of a white horse with a handsome stranger, and literally as she describes the permissiveness of the place where she spends what are, to her, six months of her life. There is Peter's teenage son Jack's reaction at meeting his attractive aunt, Peter's protective-ness of his eldest daughter, herself near Tara's age, and the fairy tale character appearing at the garden gate to steal the blossom and, if he can, steal away the girl. The story is also uncompromising about the negative consequences of sex; Tara's pregnancy and secret abortion, Richie's hurt at finding out about both the pregnancy and abortion, and the eventual jealousy of Tara's abductor.

The story is written beautifully; prosaic when following Tara's family and lyrical when told from Tara's point of view. The characters are well, and sympathetically, drawn, from Peter's family-man solidity and Tara's fey confusion as an experienced and well-travelled woman who is yet still a teenager, to Richie's despair as he starts to believe police accusations and his hurt at the Martins' rejection when he had been almost a second son to them.

In the end, *Some Kind of Fairy Tale* is about reconciliation. It is about stories and belief, about lies and half-truths and things that might be true, and how people construct their reality out of what they choose to believe. And how people deal with loss, or not.

**THREE PARTS DEAD****Max Gladstone**

Tor hb, 368pp, \$24.99

Ian Sales

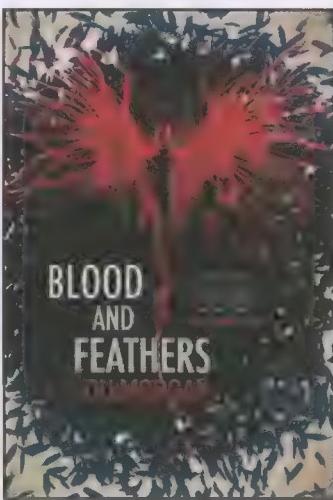
If a writer were to choose an occupation for an urban fantasy heroine, one that would allow the book's readers to sympathise with the character, lawyer would be perhaps second only to politician on a list of careers to avoid. Yet in his debut novel Max Gladstone has chosen the practice of law – and magical *necromantic* law at that – for Tara Abernathy. She's more than just a sorcerous attorney, however: she was expelled (but still allowed to graduate) from the Hidden Schools, and she is of course quite brilliant. So brilliant, in fact, that she is almost immediately recruited as an associate by Elayne Kevarian, a partner in the prestigious firm of Kelethras, Albrecht and Ao. Their first case is to unravel the contractual obligations left unfulfilled by the abrupt and mysterious death of the god Kos the Everburning, whose divine heat powers the steam generators of the city of Alt Coulomb.

Three Parts Dead is urban fantasy inasmuch as it is a story set in a world which mysteriously resembles ours but for the presence of

assorted supernatural creatures. Yes, there are vampires and zombies, but also gargoyles and gods. It's an odd mix, but Gladstone manages to evoke a fantastical plausibility to it. Alt Coulomb itself feels like a cross between New York and Tim Burton's Gotham City, but, unlike Earthly cities, it consists chiefly of penthouse apartments, abandoned godowns, fetish nightclubs and grand temples.

It's a (mostly) fast and entertaining read, but Gladstone has a tendency to drop great wedges of exposition into his narrative. He must explain all these gods and their workings, the economics around them, the necromantic law which regulates them, in order for his story to advance and his characters' motivations not seem entirely arbitrary. This desire to make every twist and turn of world and plot clear to the reader is not helped by a villain straight out of a straight-to-DVD legal thriller. And, like most legal thrillers, the story is powered by the protagonist's likelihood of success in the final courtroom showdown. How Kos died is revealed early, who killed him is no great puzzle, and the motive for the deicide is peripheral to the plot and handily explained in cross-examination.

Legal thrillers are by their nature explicatory stories – their plots often turn on technicalities of law unknown to readers. In *Three Parts Dead*, Gladstone must also explain this strange world he has built. So the payoff is withheld until everyone is present in the courtroom; and meanwhile the reader has to suffer through characters explaining world and plot to one another in order for the dénouement to make sense. Which is not to say *Three Parts Dead* is a bad novel. Mostly, it's fun, and it's quite inventive in parts. But it's also a novel of two separate genres and, unfortunately, they seem to be working against each other.



BLOOD AND FEATHERS

Lou Morgan

Solaris pb, 364pp, £7.99

Paul F. Cockburn

"Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal," T.S. Eliot once wrote (allegedly). So what is to be said of Lou Morgan, with her first novel; is she merely imitating or boldly stealing with her modern-day, Young Adult mishmash of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Paradise Lost*, *Divine Comedy* and *Lord of the Rings*?

Arguably, calling her central character Alice is a direct steal, as is using her as the reader's entry point to the novel's supernatural – though sadly non-Wonderland – world of demons, alcoholic angels and literal hell-holes. In contrast, Alice's entering through the Gates of Hell, along with the various layers of eternal torment she discovers, is a somewhat anaemic imitation of Dante's epic poem. Admittedly, the vernacular used throughout is decidedly non-Classical, though there are some moments: Morgan's reference to Hell's "visible darkness, with a presence all its own" is an obvious riff on "No light, but rather darkness visible" that comes from Milton's hellish flames.

Nor is Morgan the first writer

to set what is effectively a coming of age story against the unending war between Heaven and Hell, though her approach is likely to chime with many of her intended readers. Take Alice, for example: though we get no real sense of her having an existence before the plot starts moving, her general passiveness during the first two-thirds of the novel – verging on a continual state of shock – might well echo with many young teens' own growing incomprehension of the adult world they're about to enter.

More subtly, there's a layer of modern-day cynicism too. When Alice's main protector – the alcohol-swilling, wing-clipped, exiled-to-Earth Angel Mallory – explains the unending battle against "the Fallen", he does so in terms of an unwinnable war against terrorism. "We have to be lucky all the time – they only have to be lucky once," he says, riffing on the IRA's statement released after the 1984 bombing of the Conservative Party Conference, albeit from the point of view of "the establishment". Yet, through the Angels' repeated refusals to tell Alice everything, it's clear that they're far from being the proverbial good guys that romantic Christians might be hoping for. Lucifer may well be biased, but there's certainly truth when he tells Alice: "They're not so different from you – just as vain, just as self-centred. All scrabbling to be the best at doing what they're told, just so they can earn the right to be told what to do by someone slightly higher up the food chain."

Most importantly, in Morgan's world only a fool could believe that the Angels are on our side; humanity, stuck in the middle, can either join them or get burned as collateral damage. While there may be the teenage wish-fulfillment of Alice "going nuclear", this is still a world where the self-termed good guys are chiefly looking out for themselves.



THE SPHINX OF THE ICE REALM

Jules Verne, translated/edited by Frederick Paul Walter

State University of New York Press hb, 414pp, \$24.95

Duncan Lunan

Edgar Allan Poe published his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, in 1838. Jules Verne reviewed it in 1864, and was as baffled as other critics by the abrupt ending, in which Pym is confronted by a gigantic white shape barring his way to the South Pole, and dies on his return to civilisation before finishing his account. In 1896 Verne undertook to complete the story, focussing on the characters rather than the mystery. His start point was that Pym's supposed return was faked, and his journal had been brought back by his companion.

This first full translation has 19th century illustrations, Poe's novel and Verne's review as appendices, and textual notes on both, comparing Verne's manuscript, his amendments in proof, and the inadequacies of previous translations. It's a lively translation: one clever touch is that Walter has Anglicised Verne's use of surnames and titles, which can seem

heavy-handed to non-French readers.

Verne was impressed by Poe's insertions of factual material to make the story convincing. Indeed, I shall never forget Poe's lecture on the relative merits of scudding or lying to in a storm; but as the ship is wrecked regardless, it's irrelevant to the plot, like the gadgets on the car in the film version of *Goldfinger*. Verne learned Poe's lesson all too well: he can't mention an island without giving us a history of its real-life visits previously and since; as Walter says, "While contributing to the reader's education, the author undercuts his own narrative". Walter makes many of the infodumps interesting, but he can't beat Verne's preoccupation with the heights of mountains, even if we're never to see them again. At the novel's turning point, leaving Kerguelen Island for ever, his narrator says: "As the afternoon's last hours faded away, so did the white crests and sharp peaks of Table Mount and Mt. Havergal, the first rising 2,000 feet above sea level, the second 3,000 feet." He does it again on leaving Tristan da Cunha and at South Georgia for good measure.

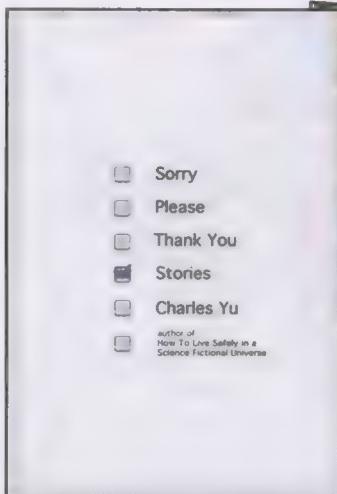
As he promised his publisher, Verne scrubs Poe's fantasy elements: since Pym visited it, the island chain with polywater rivers, remains of Egyptian civilisation and thousands of inhabitants has been swept clean by tsunamis, and Pym's approach to the pole is dismissed as exaggerated or hallucination. He keeps Poe's SF idea, suggested by Weddell's 1822 voyage, that Antarctica is not a continent but a collection of islands, ice-free for part of the year, beyond a barrier of icebergs in mid-ocean. Verne throws in a magnetic mountain on which Pym met his true end, but it's the wrong shape, the wrong colour and in the wrong place to be what barred

Pym's way – it's at the south magnetic pole, not barring the channel to the geographic one. And if it were what Pym saw, then in Verne's version, he wouldn't have had time to write it down!

Walter gives us a list of other writers' opinions as to the meaning of the vision, including the idea that Poe simply got tired of inventing more marvels and couldn't think of a way out of it. I must admit, I thought of that too. However, it turns out that Poe was experimenting with the serial form, and he intended to write a sequel, giving up due to poor sales. An important but unexplained message in a bottle was probably to provide the lead to the sequel.

But in his early review Verne spotted a bigger problem. Pym's faithful Newfoundland dog turns up out of nowhere, having been brought aboard ship without his knowledge, helps in overcoming a mutiny and then vanishes without trace when the ship is dismasted and capsized. When the survivors are forced to draw lots on the upturned hull and eat one of their number, it seems the dog is not around. Otherwise there would be no problem, at least not so soon, and clearly the dog took no part in the draw which the unfortunate seaman Parker lost.

Verne makes the aftermath of the cannibalism the keystone of his own plot, but he has the dog survive till much later, so digging huge holes in Poe's plot and his own. Surely Verne ("the professional plot devistor" according to Walter, and "one of the best storytellers who ever lived" according to Arthur C. Clarke, quoted in the notes) was aware of the multiple contradictions he'd introduced? He was in poor health at the time, but he kept writing well for years thereafter, well into the 20th century. The real mystery is not what Pym saw, but what his authors' intentions really were.



SORRY PLEASE THANK YOU

Charles Yu

Pantheon Books hb, 222pp, \$24.99/£15.99

Jim Steel

"Assuming [...] that in your reality there is still something called science fiction," writes a character in 'Note to Self', and it's a big assumption. Is there? The character in the story has realised that multiverse theory dictates that a new version of him is spun off with every incremental step of time (he's been reading broadsheet supplements). He starts writing to himself. Obviously the person who writes back, probably on the same sheet of paper, knows the answer as well as the original since he's only just separated from him. Assuming, of course, that it's not merely a self-delusional game that the character is playing. And there are yet more layers in here. Charles Yu is a philosophical explorer in the tradition of Philip K. Dick. However, Yu has been published in the *New York Times*, a market that Dick would have killed to have cracked. Dick had instead to slug it out in the pulps, only switching to paperback novels when that market collapsed. Those pulps were the originators of the genre so, in a manner of

speaking, there is no science fiction in our world any longer. The core tropes of SF have bled into other media, though, so that today everyone is familiar with them even if

they have never opened a book for pleasure in their life. Yu has been able to use this to his advantage. Imagine, for a moment, that PKD had been selling to *The New Yorker* instead of *Planet Stories*. The stories in this, Yu's second collection, have come from some very diverse sources.

'Standard Loneliness Package' opens the collection and its tone will feel familiar to readers of *Interzone*. Emotionally complex, it deals with a character who works for a company that offers timeshares for trauma, be it root canal surgery or a funeral. The clients can opt out and our narrator will take over their bodies for the duration. The narrator, of course, may be using the job to hide from himself. The co-worker he falls for, likewise.

'First Person Shooter' is Yu's zombie story, a remarkably warm example of the subgenre, and is not to be confused with 'Hero Absorbs Major Damage' which is told from the viewpoint of a character in a heroic fantasy computer game. Neither of these stories delivers original premises but they do succeed in being amongst the finest examples of their type. Yu is very good at going deeper than others. He also knows when to get out early. 'Yeoman' delivers the same conceit – riffing on the mortality of security officers in *Star Trek* – as John Scalzi's novel *Red Shirts*. The major difference is that Yu does it in fewer than twenty pages. It's a story that could only

succeed if it were hilarious, and it does succeed.

The failures are few. The title story is a suicide note written on a napkin, and is at least mercifully brief. It feels as if Yu had a couple of suitable themes for modern isolation (an all-purpose ironic greetings card with a tick menu printed inside, for example) but forgot to hang a story from them. Much better is 'The Book of Categories' which reads like a Borgesian assault on the Dewey Decimal System. Like many of Yu's stories, the form is part of the narrative. Since the eponymous book is made of a paper that can be split to form more pages, it is constantly being added to by its owners. And since it now contains over three million very thin pages, this story can only represent a tiny fraction of them. Out from the frustration of the owners, a poignant tale of loss appears in the unlikely person of a nationalist Chinese general who had owned the book on no less than seventy-three occasions.

'Adult Contemporary' is right back to messing around in PKD territory. Murray – is that a contemporary first name or a traditional second name? See what's he's doing? – is being sold a lifestyle but panics and spontaneously decides to run from it. But is that merely part of the lifestyle? Glimpses behind the scenery are nothing new these days when even Hollywood has usurped them, yet Yu still manages to connect with us on an emotional level. When the strange is familiar, we have to look closer. Charles Yu is himself a character (or two) in 'Inventory', a story that maybe shouldn't have played with a form of concrete prose but is, in every other way, a masterclass in writing.

When Yu has amassed a greater body of work then it may be possible to build a collection that clings to a theme. But who wants to know what they're getting next?

**EMPTY SPACE**

M. John Harrison
Gollancz pb, 302pp, £12.99

Jack Deighton

In early 21st century London, Anna Waterman, obsessed with the memory of her first husband Mike Kearney, shuttles in an affectless way between her psychologist Helen Alpert, her daughter Marnie and other rather shiftless denizens of her world. Every so often on her night strolls she imagines her summerhouse is on fire.

On Saudade, overshadowed by the lurking strangeness of the astronomical anomaly called the Kefahuchi Tract, riddled by its impossible physics, Enka Mercury and Toni Reno are bizarrely murdered to the sound of a disembodied voice saying "My name is Pearlant and I come from the future". An unnamed police assistant with data scrolling down her arm helps investigate the crimes.

R I Gaines is struggling to make sense of the mysterious apparition known as the Aleph, the figure of a woman contorted in an awkward way (and mysteriously accompanied by a cat) and who may bear some sort of relation to the Tract.

Meanwhile Fat Antoine, who is no longer fat, and Liv Hula,

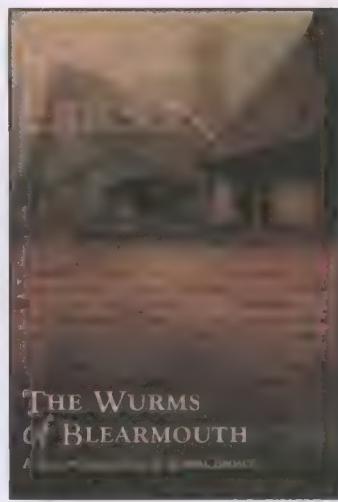
undertake a commission from the elusive M P Renoko to transport odd containers called mortsafes in their spaceship *Nova Swing*.

Many of these characters are familiar from *Light* and *Nova Swing* but here Harrison extends and refines their relationships.

The Waterman sections of *Empty Space*, at least in the early stages, are related in what seems a straightforward mainstream prose and are at odds with the SF elements. But this highlights a problem. The trouble with 'six impossible things before breakfast' scenarios, with impossible physics, is that if nothing is explicable, if things just happen, then nothing means anything – or everything. When chains of causation are lost, narrative becomes problematic and the trust between writer and reader can be undermined.

While considering the Aleph one of Harrison's characters muses that the universe is "a useless analogy for an unrepresentative state". This could, though, be a description of the novel *Empty Space* itself as Harrison is attempting a literary description of that unrepresentativeness, with all the cognitive dissonance that implies. What redeems the book is Harrison's prose, which sweeps grandly along, his descriptive powers manifest, the Waterman sections being the most flowing, apparently effortless.

Nevertheless, that Harrison in the end brings all the strands together – thus also resolving the whole of his Kefahuchi Tract trilogy – comes as something of a release, and relief. The connections between the various types of haunting are finally made, though they are more than a little strained. Maybe even impossible, for the strangeness around Saudade and the wrongness of the Tract physics remain pretty much unresolved. Still, Harrison devotees who loved *Light* and *Nova Swing* will find *Empty Space* a notable conclusion.

**THE WURMS OF BLEARMOUTH**

Steven Erikson
PS Publishing hb, 124pp, £19.99

Stephen Theaker

Lord Fangatooth Claw the Render, insane lord sorcerer of West Elingarth's Forgotten Holding, celebrates dominion over Spendrugle village with daily tortures of his brother, his rule upheld by three iron golems with buckets for heads, at least one of whom took him five months to create. By his law, being a stranger is punishable by death, which suits the villagers since it leaves no survivors of the shipwrecks from which they draw their pocket money. But the new folks brought in by the tide are the kind that take a fair bit of killing. Most dangerous are Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, necromancers, one sharp and expansive, the other taciturn and brutal, both ready to kill at the twitch of an eye.

The Wurms of Blearmouth is the fifth novella about this pair and their loyal servant, Emancipor Reese. The fourth, *Crack'd Pot Trail*, was quite brilliant but unusual, Bauchelain and Korbal Broach in the wings till the end as their pursuers preyed upon fellow travellers. Here, the necromancers play a more active role, rather like

children poking an anthill. Chronologically, it seems to follow *The Lees of Laughter's End*. Characters enter with colourful histories, battle-wounded and vengeful, but events in previous novellas, Steven Erikson's eleven colossal Malazan novels or collaborator Ian Cameron Esslemont's four won't matter much to anyone except fans trying to piece everything together.

It's a story of venal grotesques, each uniquely drawn, with whom we're happy to see dark powers play. Lord Fangatooth, who has Todd Ingram's way with a quip and a scribe on hand to record them. Whuffine Gaggs, the beachcomber who greets survivors with a smile, but hides a knife behind his back. Felooval, innkeeper, brothel owner, hiding a deadly secret in her bosom. Her daughter, dreaming of big city prostitution while stroking her lizard cat. The broken taxman who wants to take her (but not the cat). Ackle, who, hung by the neck, lives on, and worries about freezing solid in the winter. Hordillo, the sergeant who will never admit to an exceedingly unfortunate marriage. Tiny Chanter, Wormlick, Sordid: all distinctly – often uncomfortably – memorable.

Though its length would make this ideal for those unready to embark upon the ten thousand pages of Erikson's Malazan novels, only fans and collectors are likely to find £20 an attractive price for such a short book; those unsure should try the novellas collected cheaply as *The First Collected Tales of Bauchelain & Korbal Broach*. Those three are terrific, but this is better; clever, vivid, funny and surprising, with a delicious tone, mining a rich, dark seam – "the delightful pleasure of evil", Erikson calls it – producing murderously good dialogue. "What have you done to me?" asks one villain, to receive Bauchelain's reply: "Why, I have killed you." And, like Erikson, he does it with style.



ALIF THE UNSEEN

G. Willow Wilson
Corvus hb, 427pp, £12.99

Jim Steel

One Thousand and One Nights has been accused of being a Western invention; surely a theory that will appear foolish to anyone who has read a full translation. The stories themselves obviously come from a variety of different sources that span the centuries and, while it's possible that a few imposters have been slipped into the text, they pack a coherence and beauty that speaks of the ages. The translations may well be responsible for giving them an overarching voice that has drawn many impersonators over the years but one suspects that it was always there. Its narcotic cadences are tempting and easy to reproduce. The difficulty lies in writing stories that can equal many of the originals.

G. Gordon Wilson's *The Thousand and One Days* is the nested text in *Alif the Unseen* and it is constructed from the stories of the Jinn. The prologue, deliberately fantastical, tells how a sorcerer trapped a Jinn many centuries ago and forced him to recite the tales. Wilson's snippets of the text are littered with anachronistic terms

but she is much too canny a writer to make basic errors. It is quite clear that the two books are as different as night and day.

The novel turns up in the hands of a modern hacker in one of the Gulf states. The pseudonymous Alif is swiftly on the run from state security with the help of a female friend, Dina. He's mostly benign but he's obviously upset someone very powerful. He is in love, or thinks he is, with a far-off minor royal he has met online and who sends him an ancient copy of the Jinn's book for safe-keeping. Dina, naturally, is the woman he cannot see before his own eyes. They've been swapping C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman books with each other – an interesting choice, and a hint that the reader should keep an open mind in all things. Initially coming across as an Arabic cyberpunk adventure, despite the red-flag warning of the prologue, the novel imperceptibly turns into an Arabesque fantasy. One of Alif's black-market contacts is Vikram the Vampire. He's not really a vampire, of course, but it's quickly obvious that he is one of the Jinn. He is a trickster figure who can grant access to hidden places. The nearest analogue to Wilson is the Convert, an American academic who applies science and rationality to the mystery of the book, although in a novel like this it is unwise to make too many assumptions. There are layers upon layers.

Wilson is herself a bit of a mystery although more details about her are starting to appear; she was apparently working on this novel before the Arab Spring broke and it must have been nerve-wracking waiting to see if the consequences derailed it. She is actively writing nonfiction and scripting comics but hopefully we will see more fiction from her as well; *Alif the Unseen* is one of the best novels that I've read this year, and it is easily the best debut.

MILITANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

LOOPER

FRANKENWEENIE

HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA

PARANORMAN

**BEASTS OF THE
SOUTHERN WILD**

HOLY MOTORS

TOTAL RECALL

DREDD

**RESIDENT EVIL:
RETRIBUTION**



LOOPER

We've mostly made our peace with the acceptance that sf film is incapable of the same levels of narrative challenge and intellectual complexity routinely available to the written form: that what film is good at is the experiential side of sf, fast-forwarding through the logic to get at the dreams, and that the cultural value of sf film lies in its opening-up of the imagination to visions and feelings beyond the reach of lives contained by the immediately possible. But just imagine if that weren't true at all; if an sf film could be as difficult, thrilling, and technically demanding to process conceptually as Gene Wolfe or Rudy Rucker. Imagine how we'd feel about everything else that had ever been sold us. How would we even go on?

This is why it's probably quite a bad idea to read Shane Carruth's *A Topiary*, his unmade followup to 2006's similarly uncompromising, but much more modestly-conceived, *Primer*. There are only two uncontestedly great unfilmed sf scripts, of which the better-known is Richard Kelly's recently revived *Bessie*, his post-*Donnie Darko* apocalyptic media satire about a genetically-engineered teenage talking cow. But Carruth's *Topiary* aims far over the head of even Kelly's project, seeking almost incidentally to reinvent the grammar of cinema along the way. Its rapidly paced, elliptically told "Mimsy

Were the Borogoves' plot has a group of adults fail, but a group of kids succeed, in mastering a mind-wiring alien technology in which the audience is being simultaneously if imperfectly trained, and whose ultimate purpose is clarified in a final stupendous cosmos-spanning reveal. It begins, quite wonderfully, by explaining that its length (244 pages, over twice the accepted Hollywood maximum) is partly due to an experimental mode of film storytelling modelled on the "previously" segments of television shows, and partly because "Many objects in this story don't have a real-world analogue." In the unlikely event that it's ever made, it will raise the bar for sf cinema so high that everybody else might as well retire, and even as an unmade script it provides a tantalising standard against which it's simply impossible not to judge everything else.

So there's been understandable excitement about the modest involvement of Carruth (who hasn't been able to get a film made since *Primer*) with Rian Johnson's time-assassin thriller **LOOPER**. *Primer* remains the most complex, sophisticated, demanding time-travel plot ever committed to film, and Johnson's adventurous expansion of his original three-minute short (comprising essentially the opening and ending of the feature version) took script advice from



FRANKENWEENIE



DODGEBALL

Carruth on its ambitious paradoxology. It's all the more surprising, then, that *Looper* is a bit of a science-fictional omnishambles, its chaotic plotting raising more lamely-unanswered questions than *Prometheus*, and Johnson forced to respond to them in a succession of interviews and commentaries with the same unsatisfying ad-hoc handwavers. How does the time travel work? (Over to a table-thumping Bruce Willis: "I don't want to talk about time travel! If we start talking about it, we're going to be all here all day making diagrams with straws!") – though Johnson has volunteered that the machines are keyed to a particular place and a particular time relative to the point of departure, neither of which can be reset. For some reason.) Why can't bodies simply be disposed of in the future? (Stuff about implanted biotransmitters, which works less the more you think about it.) Why do Loopers have to "close their own loops" (assassinate their future selves), with the obvious risks that play out so predictably when Joe has to do it? (Erm, something to do with keeping things tight and in-house.) Why does Joe make such a business of going to Paris and then go to Shanghai instead? (Um, the Chinese finance stepped in to fund a location shoot.) How are Richard and Linda Thompson a hit in 2044? (Well, *Sound of my*

Voice had the Cranberries.) Why do they have to use those hopeless blunderbusses? (Coughing fit.) How can the ending actually change what would have happened if Joe's loop had been closed in the first place? (Hmm...) What is all this telekinesis stuff even doing in the same film? (I really need to pee now.) And that's before we even start on the basic filmwriting blunders like the Bree Tanner business with the narrator, the bungled misdirection over the future big bad ("Legend is the Rainmaker came out of nowhere ... There's no pictures of him, if he even is a him"), and having your two leads spend most of the running time in different films.

But then *Looper* is really quite a strange film, an indie blockbuster whose source of appeal is precisely that it isn't really bothered to play by the accepted rules. Top-billed Willis, as the prosthetic Joe Gordon-Levitt's future self, doesn't show up till half an hour in, and the even more belated arrival of Emily Blunt marks a startling transition to a different film entirely about trying not to be thought into a Terrence Malick cornfield by a creepy psi-powered kid. Pacing is all over the place, and characters trail random tendrils of backstory, with all the principals assigned at least one dump monologue, not one of which actually seems to lead anywhere. It's tempting to

suspect some correlation here with Johnson's way of working, which laughs in the face of screenwriting orthodoxy to write scenes dialogue-first in longhand – and indeed at the level of the individual scene *Looper* is often excellent, particularly where Jeff Daniels is involved. Frequently thrilling without ever being terribly good, it may indeed be one of the possible futures of sf cinema. But we might be better off if its loop were closed.

Another personally invested directorial short is resurrected to feature length in Tim Burton's **FRANKENWEENIE**, the stop-mo version of his ill-fated 1984 featurette about a boy scientist reanimating his dog – which never troubled US cinemas at all, though it did bemuse UK audiences as the supporting feature to, of all things, cryptozoological family potboiler *Baby: Secret of the Lost Legend*. Now, as part of the deal that gilded Disney's vaults from Burton's gift of life to *Alice in Wonderland*, the same studio that sent his beloved pet project to a premature grave has exhumed it and bombarded it with jolts of cash for its maker to bring it back in the defiantly unDisneylike and anti-commercial form of black & white stop-motion. The original live-action short was seminal Burton, the first great articulation of his master narrative about melancholic



HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA



PARANORMAN

loner artists with open wounds in their heart in a world incapable of understanding or returning their feelings, and after some rather hesitant plotting it found its balance in a brilliant ending where the angry mob with (battery) torches repent and join jump-leads in a collective act of redemptive modern Prometheanism. The reanimated version is built from the same body, but with his top screenwriter John August and animators from his *Corpse Bride* team Burton has expanded the original half-hour storyline with a cast of superbly visualised, if uncertainly plotted, gothic classmates, who catch the Herbert West bug from young Frankenstein and sow mayhem by revivifying their own lost pets in monstrously bungled undead forms.

For the first half of the film, all this plays very well, with the Frankenstein narrative engaging powerfully with children's dismay at the irreversibility of death and the lies adults peddle them to pretend it away: "When you lose someone you love, they never really leave you. They just move into a special place in your heart." (August wrote this brilliant gem of weaselly parentspeak out of trying to comfort his five-year-old over the loss of her own family mutt.) But as with the monsterised kittens and sea-monkeys, it becomes all too clear that the resuscitated

version has come back wrong. In what proves to be the film's key role, Martin Landau voice-cameos a Vincent Price puppet as an inspirational science teacher who collides painfully with American unreason: "You are all very ignorant," he tells the witch-hunting PTA. "You do not understand science so you are afraid of it ... Your country does not make enough scientist. They like what science gives them, but not the questions science asks." Sure enough, his character gets sacked from the film in the first act, never to be reinstated; and what follows only confirms his warning, as Victor and his classmates sink into a bizarre Hollywood parascience of multispecialised magic lightning that can not only reanimate but transform, mutate, and hybridise, yet only works properly when used with love. The moment to trigger synchronised facepalming from science teachers across the globe comes with the line "Your sea-monkeys: are they freshwater or saltwater?" You'd think that the "brine" part of brine shrimp might be a clue, but nope: the answer is (a), and this breed is actually deGremlinised by exposure to salt. For a film about films about science, looking back to the foundational novel on the theme, it's dispiriting that the Hollywood notion of science with love is such a different thing from actual love

of science, or even a modicum of respect.

Frankenweenie completes a trio of Halloween-marketed family animations which use sanitised versions of classic horror to serve up reassuring parables about childhood confrontations with the truth of the world and the lies in which it is wrapped by adults. The most commercially successful looks to be emerging as **HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA**, a much more colourful if not much more entertaining animation with a similarly engorged approach to cinema's vintage monster traditions. Though it makes space for a sneer at *Twilight* ("This is how we're represented!" as the original Count Dracula watches the in-flight version: "Unbelievable!"), it's clearly been drinking from the same blood bank, with vampires, werewolves, and all the other famous-monster species here presented as a harmless persecuted race who seek nothing more than a refuge for their diaspora community in their historic homeland, while century-old teenagers contemplating mixed marriages with humans have to overcome parental overprotection and hostility to exogamy. Adam Sandler's Dracula, now running a kind of Schindler's Inn for monsters, is in denial of his little Renesmée's coming of age, and when she experiences



HUSHPUPPY



DAKOTA FANNING

what the film politely calls a “zing” with a human tourist, it’s time for the Count to make his peace with the changes in the outside world, where he is no longer feared but feted in a tourist-friendly Transylvanian theme village. The feature debut of the great TV animator Genndy Tartakovsky (of *Clone Wars* and *Dexter’s Laboratory*, among much else), its monster animation has genuine zing; but the storyline plods and lumbers, with a particularly inept plot-patch involving dead vampire mom (*Frankenweenie* at least scorned the Hollywood law that all mothers must die in the opening minutes) taking time to wrap a 118th-birthday present for her infant daughter before the villagers with torches and pitchforks do their business. Meanwhile, Frankenstein’s monster himself lugubriously articulates the real problem with this downmarketing of the classic icons of terror as cuddly misunderstood cartoons: “We haven’t scared people in centuries. I don’t think I even have it in me any more.”

It’s therefore refreshing to see heritage horror much more darkly treated in what is by far the most interesting of the Halloween trilogy, the truly weird **PARANORMAN**, which uses a child’s ability to see dead people as an unsettling vehicle for romanticising mental illness. Devised by *Corpse Bride*

and *Coraline* veteran Chris Butler, and co-directed with fellow Brit Sam Fell of *Flushed Away* and various Aardman stop-mo projects, it’s a strangely conceived attempt at making a feelgood film about schizophrenia, and if anything it benefits from being stronger on the darkness and melancholy than it is on the reassurances. Like Burton’s Victor, Norman inhabits a heritage New England town that markets itself on its traditions; but the traditions here aren’t pretty Dutch-themed windmills but a dark history of witch-burning whose unquiet legacy threatens to rise again in a localised zombie apocalypse unless socially undead weirdo Norman can use his ghost-whispering talents to negotiate peace with the past. Amazingly, the plot proves to turn on the brutal execution of a harmless and sensitive 11-year-old girl – “I don’t think you’re a witch. You’re just a little kid with a really special gift,” just like scary Cid in *Looper* – and the town’s Halloween self-marketing masks a history of genuine horror and atrocity, to which only the friendless Norman, who hears voices everyone else dismisses as the manifestation of a creepy disability, is able to bear witness. There isn’t much plot or fun, and it’s a serious obstacle to the film’s commercial appeal that pretty much everyone in the film is a loser of one kind or another. But as an

exploration of the darkness behind harmless-looking horror tropes that even little kids are encouraged to enjoy, it’s unlit cobbled streets ahead of more conventional Halloween fare, with an obvious debt to Burton’s own breakthrough *Beetlejuice*, but a considerably less sunny view of the life of the dead. It’s also quite beautifully made: stick around to the end of the credits for an amazing making-of demo of the Norman maquette.

A child’s-eye view of adults’ failings is also the subject of Sundance princess **BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD**, which presents a Katrina-like event as a mix of fantastic realism and outright fantasy through the eyes of five-year-old Hushpuppy (astounding non-actor Quvenzhané Wallis) as she witnesses, narrates, and part-reimagines her dying father’s attempt to equip her for survival in a real-life bayou Waterworld on the wrong side of the levees. It’s teasingly kept unclear how much of what we’re watching is history, future, or dream, though we can be fairly confident that the animatronic packs of aurochs (which Hushpuppy imagines as boar-like) and stock footage of collapsing ice cliffs are projections of her own peculiar understanding of climate change. But the film’s strongest feature is the depiction of its fantastic, yet essentially real, world of float-



DREDD



RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION

ing survivalists roaming a fictionalised version of the Isle de Jean Charles in their boats made from trucks, as their world dies around them and Hushpuppy's dreams her tale for "the scientists of the future" who need to know what her world was like. The point, of course, is that the scientists are us, and the future is now, and her drowned world isn't even science-fictional.

The other art-sf icon of the season is Leos Carax's gloriously bizarre **HOLY MOTORS**, which remixes *Dollhouse* as *Synecdoche*-on-Seine, following a day in the many lives of Denis Lavant's chameleonic reality-actor as Edith Scob chauffeurs him between gigs in a series of variously surreal vignettes performed across a darkening Paris for hidden or imaginary cameras, and which ultimately swallow whatever identity he may once have had. Amid off-the-wall homages to Franju and Buñuel, highlights include a moccapped dragon in a violent mating dance inseminating his partner with a monstrous digital serpent whang, and a thrillingly strange Neil Hannon number with Kylie Minogue that plays like an outtake from *Last Year in Marienbad: The Musical*. It's pretty obviously an excuse for Carax to chuck together a miscellany of outré sketch ideas from a drawer full of crumpled Post-Its, but there's a surprisingly coherent and resonant concept

threading the whole ensemble together, and when the significance of the title finally peeps through at the end, the melancholy verdict "men don't want visible machines any more" becomes partly an elegy for cinema itself in a post-narrative age of reality media.

A less happy reality-bending extravaganza is displayed in Len Wiseman's pilloried remake of **TOTAL RECALL**, which is actually quite an interesting and ambitious film when it's not trying to be *Total Recall*, something it doesn't do at all well. We should nevertheless try to find it in our hearts to recognise the good in this film, which seems sincere in its love for Paul Verhoeven's 1980 original, and is evidently under the impression that it wrings more rather than less from Dick's original premise. In particular, it seems to think that it's managed to boost, rather than blow, the ambiguity over how much of the film is actually happening, and whether Quaid's implanted memories of his secret life as an action hero are an unremembered truth or a con-fabulation remembered for him wholesale by Rekall. But almost none of this stuff works – particularly at the chicken-out end – and it's best to leave your real memories of Verhoeven's film at the desk before strapping in. Thanks to a character merge which must

have seemed like a good idea at the time, Kate Beckinsale is tasked with the wholly thankless job of playing both Sharon Stone and Michael Ironside at the top of their form under both icons' best-ever director. She gives it the best she has, but can only lose.

What is nevertheless quite brilliant about the film is the production design by the great Patrick Tatopoulos, who cut his teeth on *Dark City* and directed the third of Wiseman's *Underworld* films. Notoriously, Kurt Wimmer's version for Wiseman has ditched the Martian stuff altogether in favour of an entirely new and seemingly pointless scenario about a post-apocalyptic "United Federation of Britain" colonising the antipodes through a bizarre planet-deep tube system named in honour of Mark E. Smith. It doesn't make a mass of sense, but Tatopoulos' dystopian future London stands as one of the city's great sf reimaginings, with a particularly extraordinary (and eerily recognisable) future-vehicle chase around Elephant & Castle. I doubt anyone with memories of Verhoeven's film would have thought of overwriting Mars with the Old Kent Road and a conspiracy about android invasions of Australia. But in 1980 memory researchers didn't yet know about reconsolidation, the process under which memories are overwritten even as they're retrieved. Perhaps

in the future all this will seem real.

From Brit-Cit with love comes **DREDD**, Alex Garland's stripped-down reintroduction to the world of Mega-City One through a single 3D block-raid on Lena Headey's gang empire which peddles the varieties of cinematic experience straight to the cortex through a drug that "makes the brain feel that time is passing at one percent of normal speed" – particularly, it turns out, during inventive filmic killing sequences like a kilometre fall on to concrete from the concrete's PoV. Garland's brilliant idea has been to frame the minimalist story as Cassandra Anderson's first day on the job, at a point where Psi Division doesn't yet exist, and with her story cleverly rewritten to bring Dredd in as her evaluation supervisor so we view the system through her rookie eyes rather than his. Crammed with in-references, from Chopper graffiti to the self-referential extension of the strip's celebrity block names (while oddly assuming that crime lords don't know that Lawgivers are keyed to their users), it radiates a love for its source material which shines through the cracks of budgetary limitations and production tussles. (Director Pete Travis was shut out of the edit when Garland took over in post.) We all know what Karl Urban looks like, and it's nothing like anyone's blurry mental Photoshop job of Dredd's actual unmasked head; but his chin-and-voice performance, and especially his heavily worked-on Dredd growl, is sufficiently unlike his recognisable register as to enable you to forget the familiar face underneath and for once in film (perhaps twice, after *V for Vendetta*) merge the star into your private sense of the character. The 18 certificate means characters can say fuck instead of drokk, though the blessing proves a bit mixed; despite uncredited dialogue polish

from John Wagner, Dredd ends up saying one or two things that Wagner's Dredd would never in a lifetime come out with, including an "Oh shit" when things turn postal. The South African shoot has used talent from *District 9*, which it advantageously recalls, but the budget shows: it's clearly been quite difficult to keep the helmet on straight, the iconic Lawmaster bike looks decidedly tinny, and though the city itself has always been the comics' true protagonist, the contained plot literally shutters it out for the body of the film. If it ends up playing a little too much like *The Raid* on slo-mo, it's a strong setup for Garland's intended franchise, if disappointingly timid about opening up Wagner's world from anything more than a videogame-like state of enclosed task-directed shootup action.

Having inexplicably managed to disappoint with the can't-fail concept of a 3D steampunk *Three Musketeers*, Paul W.S. Anderson returns to what he does most reliably in **RESIDENT EVIL: RETRIBUTION**, fifth in the game franchise that stands, for better or worse, as the most sustained exploration to date of the narratological transmediality of our age's two most vibrant popular artforms. If *Retribution* hasn't quite the intoxicant exhilaration of 2010's *Afterlife*, Anderson's passionate first fling with 3D where they were doing it all over the furniture, it's a much better (and even madder) videogame film, a genre in which Anderson has no serious peers. After a crazed opening set piece in which the sequel to the cliffhanger from *Afterlife* unfolds in backwards 3D, followed by 3D splitscreen exposition and for good measure the sequence we've just watched replayed the right way round, we reboot to basics with Alice waking up in an unfamiliar house and wig, only for the apocalypse to break out in her suburban

kitchen and Michelle Rodriguez drive up for her to come with if she wants to live – which she does for a few seconds before they hit a truck and the zombies move in anyway. Then we wake up (again) in a tremendous 3D holding cell to discover that Alice is now captive in an Umbrella facility composed entirely of game-level simulations populated by clones of deceased stars from previous films, while a strike force of not terribly good actors attempts a rendezvous from the surface. After adventures which include driving a Rolls through a van and hearing Rodriguez deliver the career-first line "I campaigned for gun control; I marched against the NRA", Alice eventually goes up against a brainbugged Sierra Guillory armed with a 3D pointy stick on an ice shelf over an ocean of zombies, and end up reweaponised in a teaser for the series closer which promises us "humanity's last stand, the beginning or the end", whereupon we pull back in 3D to see the White House besieged by zombies and bat-mutants. There are many reasonable people who think that *Looper* is a masterpiece and Anderson's body of work is a crime against film and games alike. It's not for me to say they're wrong, but the two at least have more in common than expected. *Looper* plays to our game-trained sense of multiply traversible narrative spaces, presenting us with a world where incompatible storylines can be simultaneously true; while Anderson's film quite deliberately stretches the fabric of narrative to its elastic limit as his characters now become arbitrarily clonable, revivable, and rewritable, and the distinction between real-world set piece and game simulation inconsequential. That it's still Milla Jovovich pinging about in 3D doesn't stop it being part of a machine for rewiring our heads. Perhaps our kids will see what their parents can't.

LASER PODDER TONY LEE

AVENGERS ASSEMBLE

PROMETHEUS

FRINGE SEASON 4

ALCATRAZ SEASON 1

**ABRAHAM LINCOLN:
VAMPIRE HUNTER**

**DEMON HUNTER:
THE RESURRECTION**

**SEEKING A FRIEND FOR
THE END OF THE WORLD**

SUPERNATURAL SEASON 7

**THE TESTAMENT OF
DR MABUSE**

THE BIRDS

SHORT CIRCUIT

**FLIGHT OF THE
NAVIGATOR**

**THE MAN IN THE
WHITE SUIT**

ALIEN AGENDAS

"And there came a day, unlike any other" when **AVENGERS ASSEMBLE** was released on Blu-ray/DVD (17 September), its official UK title different because 'Iron Patriot' – alias Norman Osborn – had only trademarked 'The Avengers' (for his *Dark Reign*) in the USA. This delivers an epic tale of super-villainy and extraterrestrial invasion with an episodic plotline that rattles along merrily enough, while Joss Whedon tackles his grandiose project seriously, yet makes a good fun movie. However, coming from a TV background, Whedon has always been more skilled at writing than directing, and so *Avengers Assemble* suffers, albeit only mildly, from the gross impositions of blatant studio-franchised checklist-film-making, with its Marvel iconography – from political simplifications to melee combat spectacle – manipulated into self-reflexive coherence by philosophical determinism. Technically, there are six Avengers, but super-science and magic trumps hi-tech assassins Black Widow and Hawkeye, so the core four are bought together for keynote WMD moral dilemma of Dr Banner, and how he learned to stop worrying and love the Hulk.

Supremely arrogant Asgardian wizard Loki has a cosmic tesseract, and knows how to use it, in pursuit of his "poisonous dream" of ruling Earth as king, performing his version of the 'kneel before Zod' routine from *Superman II*. Meanwhile, supreme spymaster Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson, shaking off dusts of sexagenarian lethargy to rise above the doldrums of his recent career nosedive in B-movies) is attempting to counteract the institutionalised paranoia and cynicism of his security council peers in video conferences, simply to marshal the inestimable talents of a 'freak show'/time bomb'

group of extraordinary individuals who need only an unfortunately duplicitous push to stir them into world-shaking 'response team' prominence, and spur them on to victory in the vividly energetic finale's battle of New York.

Packed with highbrow versus lowbrow dialogues, while the generalised culture clash motifs – of past/future, human/alien, politics/morality – are extended into an eclectic soundtrack, with Schubert interrupted by AC/DC, narrative momentum builds and, although it tends to be as clichéd as a rained-on funeral, it also aims to become the greatest superhero cinema event to date. But, oh, "You want me to put the hammer down?"

Some nagging questions about gods and monsters are briskly addressed by all concerned, and yet thorny issues of pantheistic versus monotheistic religions are just brusquely sidestepped, as if largely irrelevant, in favour of a foolish notion that belief in blind traditions can exist alongside modern atheism without open conflict. That said, the "puny god" symbolism of the Hulk's smack-down scores as atheistic subtext, framing a natural defeat of a manifest deity by a superhuman creation of science. The meaning, if there is any, of those mirror shots and artistic use of reflections, remains debatable. There is a concerted effort to blend together various canonical elements originated by a host of comic book writers (from Stan Lee and Roy Thomas to Mark Millar), though not all decades of *Avengers* lore, mined for this compressed take on a classic origin tale, are served well by Whedon's insistence upon irreverent references. Can't say I am impressed by all the fuss and bother – as a motivating factor – over the death of agent Coulson. He is only an FBI type suit instead of a supposedly 'beloved' character. Unlike *The X-Files*' obsessive



AVENGERS ASSEMBLE

Mulder, Coulson's geek hobby (collecting old trading cards) is an obvious sop to an in-jokers anonymous crowd, but vapid Coulson (not a 'son of cool') is a cipher, lacking even the presence of new SHIELD agent Maria Hill (Cobie Smulders, all set for any Marvel sequels or earthbound spin-offs), and his demise brings nothing vital to this incisive chronicle or to comic book legend.

A nerdy closing teaser in which mysterious interloper the Other (Whedonland alumni Alexis Denisof) is revealed as a beard for Thanos – a resident of unwholesome cobweb constellations of amoral indignation and fury – suggests there may be greater entertainment values lurking in Whedon's proposed 'Avengers 2', but that new phase in Marvel's fiendish master plan for total global domination is three FOOMing years away.

Peter Weyland: "I will settle for nothing short of greatness, or I will die trying." The line recalls Oswald Cabal's provocative commentary about mankind's future: "All the universe? Or nothingness? Which shall it be?" in the epilogue of *Things to Come*. Like *Avengers Assemble*, Ridley Scott's **PROMETHEUS** (Blu-ray/DVD, 8 October) is a sci-fi opus fixated on the foundation of reinterpreted creation myth, as both pictures are concerned with deep time visitations from beyond that occurred in prehistory and become relevant to futuristic/modern encounters that view Erich von Däniken styled 'ancient astronauts' as formidable deities. Not to be outdone by Swiss future-history/conspiracy



PROMETHEUS

thriller *Cargo* (*Interzone* #229), this is another space movie that emerges from its chrysalis of genre-literate development as a highly successful tribute to many classics of 20th century SF cinema – including Tarkovsky's *Solaris* and its Hollywood remake, Kubrick's *2001* and sequel *2010* by Hyams, and even Aaron Lipstadt's cult B-movie *Android* (1982).

Lost-in-space opera images are skilfully dovetailed with the serious themes of 21st century SF (same old questions, different answers), but Scott directs *Prometheus* as an archetypal nightmare movie in very much the same way that he composed *Alien* (1979). Returning to the long since exploded-into-multimedia universe that he helped create, *Prometheus* is a savvy prequel and a canny reboot for an ailing franchise faded into comic book style *Predator* crossover/gaming obscurity. Scott accomplishes much with carefully wrought accessibility while never once losing sight of genre ambiguities which, paradoxically, made the original *Alien* (clearly an update of 1958's B-movie *It! The Terror From Beyond Space*) such a big hit, with its combination of subtexts from Carpenter (*Dark Star*) and Cronenberg (*Shivers*), not to mention a plot lifted from an episode in A.E. van Vogt's classic fix-up novel *Voyage of The Space Beagle*. However, like blinking mimes/semaphore for the blind, Scott's message failed to reach viewers, and even fans/followers of the director's earlier SF work have criticised *Prometheus*, apparently

disappointed with the subtle qualities of its revisionist homage.

Tackling intelligent design beliefs, a first contact scenario, cosmic biodiversity, robotic life, and SF immortality as major themes, while presenting perverse nativity as a ghastly sideshow, this is a movie of considerable value as a confrontational thesis on futurism: "If we can, we must" declares Sir Peter Weyland (Guy Pearce, *Lockout*) in the motto for his backstory featurette and online viral, used as a promotional video for *Prometheus*. Scott demonstrates rare intelligence as a genre director and aims for a commitment to artistic integrity, so that good and even merely average stuff always looks great on screen. Holographic displays are used to surprising effect, by Weyland in his room-sized message to the crew, while from the databanks of titanic Engineers springs the accomplished gizmo of a galactic map, and both visualisations present us with backstory elements that link Zeta Reticuli to Earth in an easily understandable manner.

Flawed heroine Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace in a strong performance) holds beliefs against Darwinism, jeopardising a scientific mission already compromised by mercenary intentions and selfish attitudes. Unlike Jodie Foster's SETI scientist Ellie Arroway in *Contact*, Rapace's archaeologist Shaw represents an oppositional view not content with unearthly discoveries or cosmic wonders beyond human scales; her kind demand miracles and expect heaven/immortality. Crazily religious Shaw gets a wake up call from the indifferent universe, forcing her to suffer through an ordeal of giving birth to a 'son' of her 'god', and she barely survives it. Continuing the alphabetical naming trend from earlier *Alien* movies, android David 8 (Michael Fassbender, superb as Jung

in Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method*) follows on from Ash, Bishop and Call, but this quirky in-joke feels somewhat incongruous if *Prometheus* is to be considered as a narrative reboot. David copies behaviour and appearance from Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*, like L-plate humanoid Max 404 (Don Cheadle) of *Android* mimicked James Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Some, if not all, of Scott's recent movies can withstand several viewings. *Black Hawk Down*, and historical epics *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Robin Hood*, do improve as repeats. Sadly, others like *Body of Lies*, *American Gangster* and *Matchstick Men* do not. *Prometheus* is richly detailed enough in SF themes and aesthetic merits so its imaginative drama still fascinates after four playbacks. Its weakness as the prequel to *Alien* is also its strength as a reboot for the franchise; one that's far more challenging than Nimród Antal's *Predators* was for that associated universe. *Prometheus* answers many of the questions posed by the original quadrilogy (1979–97), yet formulates new mysteries that could be addressed in a sequel or two. So, finally meeting the arrogant 'creator' may spin off to a potential star trek war of vengeance against the destroyers and bio-WMD makers.

With excellent futuristic designs and flawless technical effects, *Prometheus* is a spectacular horror thriller that boasts impressive visuals throughout, whether images are for stunning backdrops or action packed money shots. The HD quality is nothing short of dazzling, but I have not seen the 3D version. Disc extras: deleted/alt. scenes, a couple of commentaries, and discursive supplementary featurettes showcase a 2023 TED conference speech by the young Weyland in his oratory prime.



German philosopher Schopenhauer proclaimed that "Talent hits a target no one else can hit; genius hits a target no one else can see." Despite its pseudo-science content, questions of what constitutes genius (and false modesty) are at the heart of TV series **FRINGE SEASON FOUR** (Blu-ray/DVD, 24 September). Wild theories considered by the drama's FBI-led investigators can be appreciated as a framework to explore open-minded speculative/paranormal fiction culled from modern myths of contemporary fantasy into SF as if edited by Occam's razor. The intuitive leaps which seem to have been made by humanity ever since we learned to weaponise rocks are exemplified here by (not-) mad scientist Dr Walter Bishop (John Noble). But, what is your alternative-world self like?

"There is no-one else, there's just me." FBI agent Olivia Dunham (Anna Torv) somehow feels the absence of Peter, even though she cannot know he's missing, since his character was wiped from existence at the end of season three (*Black Static* #25). Torv is most impressive when it comes to portraying such a multilayered character in either blonde or redhead incarnations, and delving into a crisis of identities that is quietly profound, emotionally resonant regarding the pressures of relationships, and often wryly amusing as she wrestles with conflicting

memories of her own past. In fact the entire cast of *Fringe* are great as they manage to portray distinctive versions of their supporting roles without causing any confusion – for regular viewers, at least.

New FBI agent Lincoln Lee (Seth Gabel) is understandably baffled at first by the covert Fringe division's team as much as the bizarre worlds they live and work in; a multiverse where "answers lead to more questions". While a sympathetic Observer named September (Michael Cerveris, *Stake Land*) goes about mysterious or perhaps unfathomable business, Olivia's alternative-Earth doppelgänger, dubbed 'fauxlivia' from under dirigible skies of a U.S.S.A. (where Batman is Mantis!), is asking for her counterpart's co-operation, not trading places for inter-dimensional espionage again. Shared hallucinations clue-in Walter and Olivia to Peter Bishop's haunting presence, even though he is not lost in a metaphysical void; he was actually erased from *Fringe* reality and collective memories. Contractual obligations of TV casting soon reassert his partnership role as the male lead, and yet, when Peter eventually returns, he is at first a complete stranger armed with all secret knowledge. The programme's timeline reset button comes online, but Peter's reintegration from outsider status, to reunite father and son, is difficult when Walter doubts

his own sanity. Other TV shows such as *Witchblade* and *Primeval* have overwritten their established timelines before, but never with such exquisite subtleties and intertwined sophistication as the eigenstate-collapsing purpose and poignant depths of *Fringe*.

Massive Dynamic's CEO Nina Sharp (Blair Brown) is only too pleased to help her 'adopted' daughter Olivia, but she appears to be up to something crooked as the plot quickens. Checking in, over there, with Walternate, he's just as much a schemer, and sends agents to carry out counter-intelligence missions over here. Episodic plots are varied, as usual, often riding high like an astronaut on speed. Improbable events become highly likely in *Fringe* and, no matter how strange things get, it is important to remember that even "leprechauns are possible". Extraordinary measures are used to counteract outré happenings and threats from beyond, because FBI protocols and national or international laws are useless when "nothing like this has ever happened before". The milieu of *Fringe* is only one miraculous/transcendental blip away from overwhelming uncertainties of the Singularity. Both are underground, and they need digging, but a landmine and a goldmine are two very different things.

Can the flipside of a serial killer help his alt. self? 'Pod people' with translucent skin are homicidal shape-shifters, perfect imposters/infiltrators. One scientist's time bubble, with spiral-field inefficiency, rips through "the fabric of spacetime" – just like warps always do! We meet an invisible man who really wants to be seen. *Fringe* super villain David Robert Jones (Jared Harris) is back with unique vengeance, organising his own brand of terrorism – even from federal custody – because the air tastes sweeter on the other side. A young girl's sketches of

horror predict accidental deaths. Another seer becomes a compassionate killer to prevent suffering. There is a mutant/schizoid version of *Brigadoon* (plus zombies, minus songs). The rapport of siblings practicing non-verbal communication seems indistinguishable from telepathy. Peter gets a handle on Observer comm-tech in the form of a helpful summoning beacon.

Maintaining a sense of purpose or intent after crossing an event boundary is a difficult enough trick, but especially when the individual moves between worlds, not simply through a doorway. No wonder Lincoln feels he has a chance with faux Liv, on the other side, after his counterpart's death. This season's story arc accelerates when children of Cortexian are abused as WMD triggers. Previous seasons had plotline threads trailing back to 1980s with visual styling to match and, like *Dollhouse*'s doom 'n' gloom *Epitaph* episodes, *Fringe* also jumps ahead. This season, we have *Letters of Transit*, depicting Observer-occupied 2036, as the Boston native resistance struggles against dystopia with the aid of Dr Bishop, amusingly quoting *The Prisoner*'s Number Six, when he's defrosted from amber by his granddaughter, the futuristic *Fringe* agent Henrietta (Georgina Haig). "You understand the risks of wanting to save the world?"

In two-part season finale *Brave New World*, a nano-virus causes spontaneous human combustion, and guest star Leonard Nimoy returns as that "brilliant bastard" William 'Belly' Bell. Of course, these events are closely connected as "desire becomes destiny" with a rapturous ending. *Fringe* 4 benefits (disc extras, just add liquorice) include a lively and fascinating half-hour panel discussion with Noble, show runners, and a couple of scientists. It's one of the very best 'bonus' items about a TV series that I have ever seen.



It's a given that most of the television shows made today are produced simply as filler material to occupy time slots in busy network schedules, where failure rates are high, and **ALCATRAZ SEASON ONE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 15 October), cancelled after thirteen episodes, is another one of those. Composed from throwaway ideas, this combines a *Prison Break* conspiracy and manhunt intrigues with escapist fare of *The Philadelphia Experiment* and timeslip-returnees idea of *The 4400*. It supposes that several prisoners due to be relocated to other mainland facilities when the Rock closed in 1963 actually vanished in an unsolved mystery. They are back in the present, on the streets of San Francisco, and they have not grown older since disappearing.

SFPD detective Rebecca Madson (TV actress Sarah Jones, her first lead role in a series) gets the job of helping a secret federal task force catch the wanted men, who are still treated as escaped convicts with no reprieve granted for 'time served' whether they return to nefarious activities or not. Even with the likes of Sam Neill on hand to provide some weighty moralist support, *Alcatraz* fails as episodic character studies of a rogues' gallery (sniper, kidnapper, robber, bomber, poisoner and, of course, serial killer), held under an oppressive regime. This also fails to tackle the SF notion of even the vaguest 'future shock' reactions



to half a century of social and cultural changes or technological progress, despite the obvious potential for such comical or dramatically poignant bewilderments.

Instead, *Alcatraz* falls back upon unsolved mysteries of the past for its dubious appeal, especially crime stories related to the corrupt warden who gamely fosters the medical experiments and tortures by a doctor named Milton (superb character actor Leon Rippy, great as angel Earl in TV series *Saving Grace*). But it succeeds, at least partly, as a sci-fi tinted/alternative history cop show drama about a heroine with a mission.

The heroine's partner, comics shop owner and a 'civilian authority' on Alcatraz history Dr Soto (boring fat bloke Jorge Garcia, from *Lost*) hints at a Marvel source of inspiration for this actioner scenario – as its basic idea echoes the post-*Disassembled* teamwork of Brian Michael Bendis' *The New Avengers* (2007), which featured heroes gathering to recapture a horde of super-villains that all escaped together from Ryker's Island penitentiary. *Alcatraz* has too many period-scene briefings, routine car chases (our heroine drives Steve McQueen's Mustang from 1968's classic *Bullitt*), plus plenty of sadly unexceptional gunplay and only average stunts, resulting in Becca's string of triumphant arrests, which might have continued until it was all over bar the gloating.



Informed by *Wild Wild West* alt. history styling and plenty of *Van Helsing* CG-action, the historical horrors of **ABRAHAM LINCOLN: VAMPIRE HUNTER** (DVD/Blu-ray, 22 October) offer a bundle of genre influences, awkwardly summed up as Abe Skywalker and the Gaslight/Steampunk Matrix. Very much a comic book movie, which even has animated flashbacks, *AL:VH* is directed by Timur Bekmambetov, who won deserved acclaim for novelty and excellence with contemporary/dark fantasy Russian movies



"Why can't I hear your heartbeat?" A sequel to Gordon Chan's 2008 fantasy *Painted Skin* (*Interzone* #241), the re-titled **DEMON HUNTER: THE RESURRECTION** (DVD/Blu-ray, 5 November) is directed by the mononymous Wuershan – previously maker of action comedy *The Butcher, The Chef, and The Swordsman* (2010). White-haired fox demon spirit Xiaowei (Xun Zhou, *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate*) is freed from her ice prison to seduce and kill men, and feed on their hearts. As before, the femme fatale Fox hides in a human form, affecting the tragic life of facially-scarred princess Jing (Wei Zhao, *14 Blades*). Similarly, the cowardly demon hunter is a nervous wreck, flaunting his talismanic almanac while lacking the conviction and

Night Watch and *Day Watch*, but split critics and fans alike with CGI-heavy 'superhero' conspiracy adventure *Wanted* (2008). This continues the live-action cartoon appeal of *Wanted*, with hard lessons for the future serial slayer's 'power of truth', and demos of axe fu (perhaps intended as a corny allusion to the fable about young Washington's cherry tree felling and admitting the truth).

In his first major part, Benjamin Walker approaches this ridiculous account of an iconic presidency with such a straight faced yet stumbling charm that he becomes his own comic relief. Rufus Sewell makes a great super-villain as the immortal Adam, who attempts a revolutionary coup for vampire-kind. There are many spectacular

moral strength that is required to combat evil.

It's a darkly romantic fairy tale of bittersweet emotional content where any love means pain, and it's a cleverly designed, haunting movie, with plenty of magnificently artistic camera work. There is not much of an empire-scale plot here, but some richly colourful and exquisite trippy fantasy images, high quality CGI, and imaginative wire-fu for duels and battles, is assembled around the central flaying skin-job scenes of the body-swap gambit, which soon places General Huo (Kun Chen, *Mulan*) in the middle of a royal love triangle. Bird demon sister Quer (rising starlet Mini Yang) only gets in the way, like an unwitting heroine. War against wolf tribes looms on the horizon, and the magical/pagan ceremony, on the day of a solar eclipse, aims to save one kingdom by sacrificing the royalty of another. Of course, the transcendentalist happy ending (of a sort) is not just charmingly predictable but essential and eagerly anticipated.

and outrageously OTT set-pieces, from a running fight amidst stampeding horses to Civil War battlefronts, as the heroic Prez saves the Union from the pro-slavery clans united in their plot to establish an Undead States of America against humanity. At Gettysburg, Union troops load up with silver munitions delivered by 'underground railway', while an overnight express decoy is derailed into a burning train wreck, serving as a symbol of what this mildly amusing blockbuster parody does to 19th century Americana.

Bloody honest Abe has been fictionalised in a variety of genre tales, sometimes struggling to maintain any world class statesman-like dignity: recreated in the 23rd century to fight aliens along-

side Kirk and Spock in *Star Trek* TV episode *Savage Curtain*; helping educate no-hoppers Bill and Ted with their time-travelling *Excellent Adventure*; and losing the war to the south in Kevin Willmott's mockumentary/satire *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*.

In the end, despite the considerable chutzpah of its makers at framing a virtual history via counterfactual whimsy, this is an unfortunately simpleminded, disposable adaptation by Seth Grahame-Smith from his own reportedly bestselling novel (that I have not read), plainly inspired by Stoker's *Dracula*, which had a different Abraham fighting the ultimate 'prince of darkness'. Perhaps that helps identify the big problem here. There is never enough dark-

ness in this rather timid movie. Its sadly lightweight, secret biographical tract never gains traction on the moral issues of slavery and racial domination. A fantasised supernatural past where all-white vampires lost their claim (on evolutionary grounds?) to superiority might have been genre-breaking horror. If only more had been made of that aspect, the limited impact of playing this new myth so seriously, without any typically broad obviousness of American humour, would not feel quite so arbitrary here, and may have resulted in a scandalously important movie – still a possible threat to current political complacency, unless the 28th Amendment forbids any such media exploitation of subversive agitprop!



Ever since Don McKeller's *Last Night* (1998), concerning millennial anxieties, and Michael Haneke's aftermath drama *Time of the Wolf* (2003), the twin portfolios of pessimism and cynicism have been circling downbeat tropes of 'judgement day' where the personal stories of individuals/families are central instead of political reactions and global action. After Lars von Trier's mesmerising *Melancholia*, and the sadly less effective *Another Earth* by Mike Cahill, here is an addition to the cycle of quiet cataclysm

movies, **SEEKING A FRIEND FOR THE END OF THE WORLD** (Blu-ray/DVD, 5 November), by new writer-director Lorene Scafaria.

A meteor is bringing doomsday while insurance salesman Dodge (Steve Carell, *Evan Almighty*) is pining for lost love in his lonely flat. Just as he proved in the largely witless remake of *Get Smart*, Carell is unbearably lifeless as a romantic hero, and his maudlin sitcom routines in this hypothetical rom-com stands in marked contrast to the consider-

ably brighter demeanour of his upstairs neighbour Penny (Keira Knightley, struggling to play it delightfully ditzy, as if her role is grossly underwritten). Switching from urban/domestic farce to road movie, the mismatched couple flee from city rioting that harks back to Steve De Jarnett's great cult favourite *Miracle Mile* (1988). They confront survivalists along their homeward routes. There is an orgy scene, played for cert.15 laughs, which might just make viewers wish to see Michael Tolkin's searing *The Rapture* (1991) again. Throughout all this, the frivolity seems too phoney as morbid significances flail about distractingly, while churning up charmless trivia and sentimentality, for a tiredly predictable relationship melodrama that is far more interested in compiling the ultimate playlist of a character's favourite music than genuinely philosophical thinking about how to face unavoidable oblivion. Dodge lives in a world served by high-speed Internet but his intelligence bandwidth is stuck on a dial-up tariff. →

Cameos by William Petersen and Martin Sheen fail to enliven a storyline that unfolds without a single emotion that was not manufactured in a studio-hosted script conference, and rubber-stamped by a legal chief from the US government department of sincerity. The presence of Knightley may keep us watching, but the flimsy narrative has nowhere to go as it strains too hard to avoid the approaching finale, with nothing more than a hollow question, about whether Penny is a good match for dull Dodge, to shield us from utter nihilism. If this movie has a worthwhile purpose, it is only that it may prompt viewers to reconsider their own mortality, and how to make the best use of whatever time remains. We are privileged to live in an era when leaving our home planet is a technological possibility, and could be done to ensure the continuation of humanity elsewhere – if the Earth is actually threatened with total destruction by the indifferent universe. Yet we still spend whole lifetimes killing each other in pointless/profitable warfare and monstrously corrupt political squabbles, while preventing the activities of scientific progress that might well brighten the future, if not for us, then for generations to come. As food for thought – if compared to all that – the content of *Seeking a Friend* has only the nutritional value of eggshells and used tea bags from household recycling bins. Where are the new big thinkers in our old small world?

Will there be many more days after tomorrow? If this is the best indie formula for ‘human story’ sci-fi that America can produce to tackle the big issues, perhaps the sooner humankind is made extinct the better. Obviously this trend, continuing with *End of the World* (2013), expects the Mayans to be wrong.



“Leave your name, number and nightmare after the beep.” Created by Eric Kripke, **SUPERNATURAL SEASON SEVEN** (DVD/Blu-ray, 19 November) begins with a mutated angel in a raincoat, Castiel (Misha Collins), taking over deity duties – claiming to be god, with eternal grace and mortal sin under new management, while he goes about slaughtering corrupt hypocrites and doing a good job of it, too: “It is a new day on Earth and in heaven. Rejoice.”

Meanwhile, monster-hunter Dean (Jensen Ackles) restores cars and guzzles beer in his spare time. His haunted brother Sam (Jared Padalecki) struggles against hallucinations from hell, but chivvies the heroes – including redneck sidekick techie Bobby (Jim Beaver, *Deadwood*) – back into action. They put a binding spell on Death (Julian Richings), although Death is not much help with the big problem that some things out of purgatory cannot be contained elsewhere. Cases of possession further undermine Sam’s fragile sense of reality, and this season’s story arc tiptoes around notions of religious delusion and basic incompetence of legal insanity, until a psyche meltdown and ECT for mental hospital patient Sam brings his madness to the fore.

It seems like madness that the Winchester brothers believe, without question, almost every *X-File* report or folklore reference that victims (“Did you mean it when you said you had an open mind?”) or clients (sometimes found by Internet trawling for ‘freaky acci-

dents’) tell them, even when saving guilty parties from otherworldly justice. As before on this show (*Supernatural Season Six, Interzone #236*), there are irreverent dialogues and episode titles to give away pop culture references that many routine plots are, at least partly, inspired by. The smog of intertextuality is especially prevalent with regard to the moral and ethical concerns of using ancient artefacts, or deciphering arcane messages (an Indiana Jones versus Da Vinci Code, anyone?), and episode *Slash Fiction* has a pair of shape-shifters impersonating Dean and Sam on a murder spree. It’s no surprise that Ackles and Padalecki have great fun while playing their Winchester doppelgängers.

The Slice Girls sees our heroes tangling with homicidal Amazons, one of whom is Dean’s rapidly-aged daughter, but she appears without any serious paternity issues. Set-piece jokes are witty sometimes, as when Sam mistakenly barges into a supposed necromancer’s coven only to find a yogic Lamaze class; and some scathing one-liners are topical, as when demon king Crowley (Mark Sheppard) declares “This isn’t Wall Street, this is hell. We have a little something called integrity.”

Plucky the hoodoo clown’s mojo conjures up a “bed-wetter’s horror show.” The lookalike cousin of Sadako from *Ringu* stalks a brewery, where she can only be seen by drunks. There is a haunted house in Bodega Bay with many lurking residents. The supporting characters may be ‘killed’ off

but, like returnees in comic book reboots or *Beetlejuice*, sometimes they come back. Recurring but irregular players like Rachel Miner (*Butterfly Effect 3*, *Penny Dreadful*, Jason Connery's 51) as the slayer-with-attitude Meg, and Mark Pellegrino as Sam's 'imaginary enemy' Lucifer, pop up just to cause extra trouble for the boys. The guest stars often seem chosen for their genre credentials, so Jewel Staite (*Firefly*, *Stargate: Atlantis*) gamely portrays a childhood sweetheart turned brain-eater Amy Pond (a *Doctor Who* in-joke), while *Buffy/Angel* veterans James Marsters and Charisma Carpenter are a witchcraft comedy double-act as a feuding married couple. Emily Perkins (*Ginger Snaps*) returns as the biggest fan of *Supernatural* in a postmodern episode titled *Season Seven, Time for a Wedding*; Steven Williams (*X-Files*) appears as the guide in coma patient Bobby's dreamscape; Nicholas Lea (*X-Files*) plays Eliot Ness for a 1940s timewarp done "the Chicago way"; and Felicia Day (star of *Red: Werewolf Hunter*) ably plays a nerdy hacker in *The Girl With the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo*.

Sadly, this series is too stuck in the conventions of episodic TV to ever develop into an occult variation of *Fringe*. Despite its frequent arterial splatter effects being a welcome gore-fest compared to the relatively bloodless vanquishing of *Buffy* and *Angel*, the genre playfulness of *Supernatural* clearly lacks sufficient peculiarities to rival the genuinely inventive revisionism of such similarly themed movies as *Hellboy*, *Night Watch*, *Constantine*, and Phillip Ridley's *Heartless*. *X-Files* had its *Lone Gunmen* spin-off, and *Supernatural* had ten half-hour episodes of the web-series *Ghostfacers* (2010), plus an anime series. A complete boxset of *Supernatural* seasons one to seven is also released on region-free Blu-ray, 19 November.

RETRO SPEX

Fritz Lang's 1933 **THE TESTAMENT OF DR MABUSE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 24 September) is the sequel to silent classic *Dr Mabuse, The Gambler* (1922). It is also the middle film in a trilogy that concluded with *The Thousand Eyes of Dr Mabuse* (1960). If 'banned by the Nazis' does not sound uncannily like a selling point winner to jaded cineastes today, I really do not know what other ad-line might appeal more to modern viewers. Credited with powers of telepathic hypnosis, Mabuse is perhaps German media's first proper super-villain, very much like European predecessors thieving French psycho *Fantômas*, notorious sadist Fu Manchu, and Sherlock's nemesis Moriarty.

Seemingly in control of an empire of crooks, Mabuse is a haunting presence in the film, even though he is mostly off-screen, as his 'testament' is read as a blueprint for wickedness. Mabuse (a typecast Rudolf Klein-Rogge) is a beak-nosed scribbler in an asylum cell, from where he appears to conceive daring headliner plots for robbery, murder, and terrorism. An informer on the telephone is about to reveal Mabuse is the criminal mastermind hidden behind curtains of evil, when the lights go out, and there are shots in the dark, as the mad genius strikes again. Even when the mental hospital inmate dies, another headman takes his place. Although the weirdness has long since fallen into campily corny genre cliché, it was a novelty and quite original in its heyday and proved to be greatly influential on cinema and comic book trends in the following decades.

Testament is a proto noir with creepy supernatural angles amidst the startling hallucinatory images of gothic expressionism. Confrontational hero Tom's attempt to



TESTAMENT OF DR MABUSE

assassinate Mabuse fails, and he's locked in a death-trap room (like many a set-up by villains of TV's later *Batman*). A police siege ends with surrender and suicide. This narrative's busyness builds up to a climactic arson fire at a chemical plant, which has disaster movie scale on a factory location. The final chase and seeming capture defies all rationality by intent.

Disc extras: a perceptive, mega-informative commentary by film scholar David Kalat, recorded for a *Mabuse* DVD boxset in 2009, that helps us to comprehend some of the knotty confusions and punctures legendary analogies (of anti-Hitler subversion etc), but, as Kalat notes for any insightful analysis of this enjoyably puzzling thriller: "Lang makes us work." Oh, yes (ha-ha), what a bastard!

Alfred Hitchcock: Masterpiece Collection is a 14-film boxset (Blu-ray, 12 November). This collectible package includes widely acknowledged classics *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960), but I have always thought **THE BIRDS** (1963) was the director's best picture. With set-piece special effects such as children attacked by gulls, and a flock of sparrows flying down the chimney, it was the very first mini-epic monster movie in the subgenre of nature's revenge. It showed a fragile humanity that is not safe, even when indoors, from this apocalyptic nightmare with its wingspan over the world. Hitchcock skilfully created several intense action scenes without dialogue or any music, and these retain their almost silent movie styled impact today.



THE BIRDS

Psycho may be viewed as kick-starting the serial killer/slasher genre, but *The Birds* was even more influential and spawned a greater variety of genre movies, from zombie siege (*Night of the Living Dead*) to numerous creature features that include *Jaws*, rats movie *Willard* and sequel *Ben*, *Day of the Animals*, cult oddities *Squirm* (about killer earthworms) and *Frogs*, and provided a template for the varied horrors about ants, bees and spiders against mankind. Through its bird strikes, Hitchcock's greatest mystery horror cleverly orchestrates the poignant loss of a civilised society's sophistication, and portrays the collapse of a smugly human superiority over nature. For the most powerful and persuasive shocks, characters are struck dumb, incapable of even screaming with fear. This studied evocation of primal terror makes a contrast to earlier scenes of witty or scathingly critical banter between Mitch (Rod Taylor, *The Time Machine*) and Melanie (Tippi Hedren, who later starred in Hitchcock's *Marnie*).

The school playground scene with crows was neatly parodied by Mel Brooks in his Hitchcock homage *High Anxiety* (1997). A TV movie sequel, *The Birds II: Land's End* (1994), had precious little to add to the avian foes market but, recently, Sheldon Wilson's raven infested *Kaw* (2007) was a worthy new entry.

Extras: a 14-minute featurette about *The Birds'* influence upon later monster movies, with astute comments from the likes of John Carpenter and Joe Dante. There are audio excerpts from recordings



SHORT CIRCUIT

of Truffaut interviewing Hitchcock, promo materials, photo gallery/storyboards, and Hedren's screen test, but the best bonus is substantial new retrospective *All About The Birds* (80 minutes) that includes detailed critical analyses that offer several fascinating opinions very different to views expressed in Camille Paglia's monograph of *The Birds* (BFI Film Classics, 1998), plus a range of interview clips like Veronica Cartwright's heartfelt anecdote about sharing her 13th birthday with cast and crew on the set.

Made in 1986, John Badham's robot comedy **SHORT CIRCUIT** (Blu-ray, 19 November) is about strategic artificially intelligent nuclear transport (SAINT) number five. After being struck by lightning, the battle droid explains its new self-awareness as "life, not malfunction", becoming cuter by the minute when mistaken for a stranded alien and adopted by delightfully naïve Stephanie (Ally Sheedy) for her small-town Oregon animal-shelter home. In trying to protect 'Number 5', she teams up with engineering genius Newton (Steve Guttenberg, failing to convince as a geek, never mind a science pioneer). Despite being pursued by military goons a happy ending is assured, and so it led to Kenneth Johnson's sequel in 1988. Badham had previously directed techno-thrillers like *WarGames* and helicopter movie *Blue Thunder* (both 1983), and *Short Circuit* cribbs the weapons demo of its first scene from *Blue Thunder* and also borrows images from *Terminator* (1984) – although



FLIGHT OF THE NAVIGATOR

Number 5 is as different to Skynet puppets as Spielberg's alien in *ET* was compared to Carpenter's creature in *The Thing*. In the wake of Michael Crichton's rogue robots actioner *Runaway* (1984) and the scrap yard discovery of *My Science Project* (1985), *Short Circuit* had nothing very interesting to say about AI, settling for a lively but entirely predictable rom-com scenario packaged with sci-fi in-jokes: another war-drone talks like the Cylon toaster from the original *BSG*. However, despite its anthropomorphic tendency, Number 5 is a masterpiece of functional design with input from Syd Mead, and its appearance was recycled for *WALL-E*. This hi-def edition includes a sequence with the robot dancing to Badham's *Saturday Night Fever* on TV that was previously cut from DVD releases due to copyright problems. Disc extras: behind-the-scenes footage, interviews with cast and crew, and a director's commentary.

In the wake of Spielberg's phenomenally successful *ET* (1982) there was a thankfully short-lived family-friendly sci-fi craze, but for every *Back to the Future* (1985) the Hollywood phase produced a clutch of much weaker efforts. Disney's **FLIGHT OF THE NAVIGATOR** (Blu-ray, 19 November) was directed by Randal Kleiser, who previously jumped from 1970s mainstream TV to make hit musical *Grease* and castaway-teens romance *Blue Lagoon*. Set in Florida, this sees 12-year-old David (Joey Cramer, who appeared in *Runaway*) abducted by a UFO in 1978, and then returned to Earth



THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT

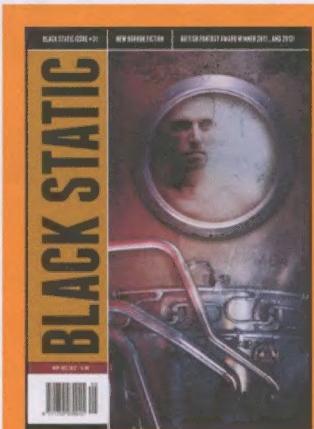
eight years later without having aged a single day. After being reunited with his distraught mother Helen (Veronica Cartwright) and his little brother Jeff – who's now his older brother – prodigal son David is placed into temp custody of NASA scientists for psych tests while Dr Faraday (Howard Hesseman, perhaps best known as Dr Johnny Fever in TV series *WKRP in Cincinnati*) investigates the mysterious alien spacecraft which resembles the Martian ship in *Quatermass and the Pit*. They soon discover the kid's head is full of alien lingo from planet Phaelon, four hours away at lightspeed. David escapes in the photo-real CGI ship, with its chatty AI and alien pets' medley, so much childish farcing about ensues. Sarah Jessica Parker is among the supporting cast in a required 'nice assistant' role. This looks and sounds appallingly dated, and there are lots of terrible gee-whiz sci-fi jokes and American cultural juvenilia to cringe at. Some visual effects for the airborne sequences are an improvement upon the flight of a stolen futuristic warplane in Clint Eastwood's *Firefox* (1982), but it must be said that Joe Dante's *Explorers* (1985) was far superior to Kleiser's kiddie video effort in every respect, and it still is.

Inspired by the history of denim and the invention of nylon, and based upon a stage play by Roger MacDougall, director Alexander Mackendrick made **THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT** (Blu-ray/DVD 19 November) in 1951. This film is my favourite of all the Ealing comedies. Sid Stratton (Alec Guin-

ness) is a frustrated chemist who works as a lowly labourer in textile factories. He upsets one employer by spending four grand on heavy hydrogen, but at Birnley mills his knowledge of electron microscopes wins him a quick promotion to the research laboratory, where his experiments with long-chain molecules for synthetic polymers creates an almost indestructible fabric with charged surfaces that repel dirt, but it is even dye-proof. Sid's prototype suit is a bit luminous: "Makes you look like a knight in shining armour," opines the boss' appealingly bolshy daughter Daphne (Joan Greenwood).

There is an engaging romantic phase but *The Man in the White Suit* addresses rag trade anxieties over their anticipated loss of business and the potential collapse of the garment industry. Mill owners conspire, with every intention of halting ambitious Sid's progress. This is one of the most dryly amusing British mad scientist movies but it offers far more than just industrial slapstick and SF humour. It also examines many sophisticated and complex issues of hardcore commerce versus dreamy futurism, yet without falling into social/political simplicity of a Luddite rebellion against a lone genius. Sid is the impractical boffin at odds with union strike action, but he becomes sympathetic to working class fears as the drama exposes many faults in the structure/mechanisms of power that lead to corruption. A combination of character actors and subtle direction ensure that this slice of vintage SF cinema remains quite relevant sixty years later.

The restoration and hi-def transfer is excellent. Disc extras include 13 minutes worth of talking-head critical comments about the story's themes and film production history/footnotes that makes this a postwar classic amongst Ealing Studios' output.



Tony also reviews many DVDs and Blu-rays for our sister magazine *Black Static* – over 40 in the new issue #31, out now, with easy to enter competitions to win great films like *We Are The Night* and *Excision*.

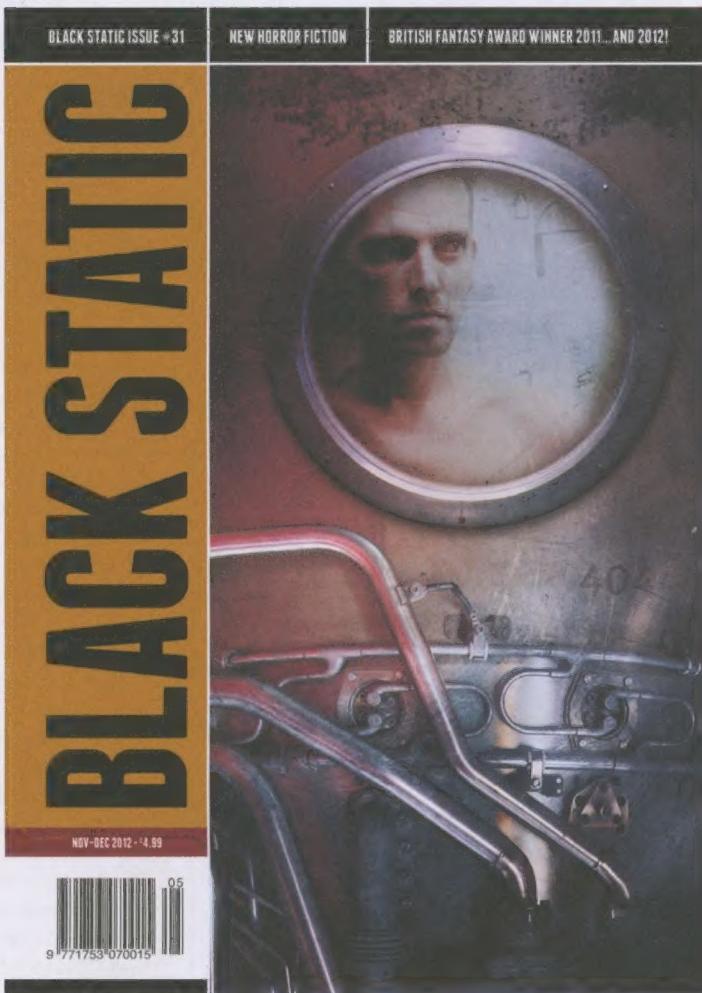
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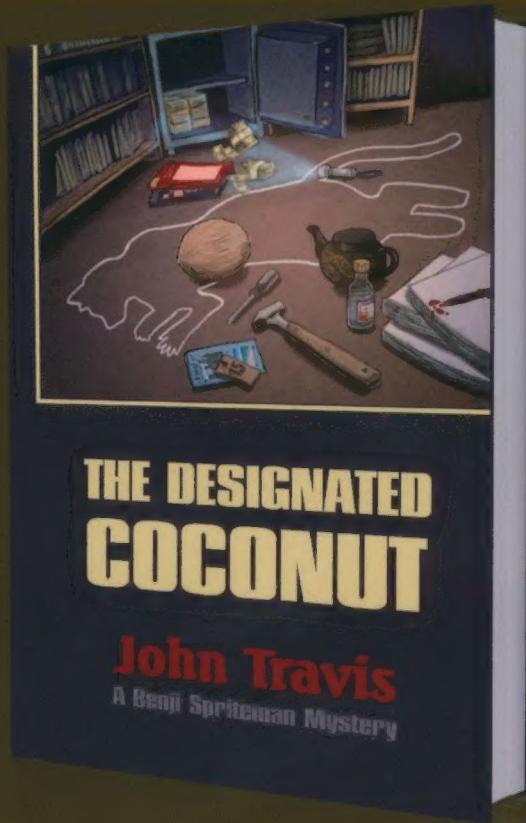
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